Challenging Self-Defeating Thought Patterns

When people are depressed or anxious or have low self-esteem, they often develop the habit of thinking in ways that confirm negative opinions about themselves, support their fears, and contribute to and perpetuate low self-image. Three types of distorted thinking are **selective attention** (paying more attention to what confirms a sense of being "bad" or "unloveable" than what disproves these ideas), **selective memory** (remembering what confirms a sense of being "bad" or "unloveable" rather than what disproves these ideas), and **selective interpretation** (unquestioningly believing what confirms a sense of being "bad" or "unloveable" and thinking that things that disprove these thoughts are mistakes or lies; selective interpretation can also involve interpreting ambiguous information as confirming negative self-perceptions). These patterns develop over time and become so entrenched that the thoughts seem "natural" and "real." However, they are distortions because they are incomplete and/or untrue. These patterns can be changed over time, with practice.

The following exercise, when done regularly, is one way to work on changing distorted thought patterns that lower self-esteem. This may be hard at first, but with practice, it will get easier.

Noticing Your Usual Thought Patterns

1. What are one or two things that happened today that call into question the idea that you are unloveable or "not good?" (e.g., a friend texted you, you did something nice for someone, someone smiled at you, you had a positive thought about someone).

2. How did you **feel** in this situation(s)? (e.g., happy, uncomfortable, confused, numb)

3. What did you **think** about this situation(s)? (e.g., Was it important or not? Was it "real" or not? Did it happen because of something you did or just by chance? Did you "deserve" it?)

4. Do the feelings and thoughts in #2 & #3 contribute to selective attention/memory/ interpretation? If so, how? Are these typical thoughts and feelings for you (i.e., a typical pattern)?

Challenging Distorted Thought Patterns

- If your answer to Question 3 on the previous page was based on distorted thought patterns, try to come up with a more realistic interpretation of the situation(s) described in Question 1.

- What positive things did you do today? (everything "counts"—nothing is insignificant; e.g., completed a task, texted a friend, got out of bed when didn't feel like it, ate a good meal, made an effort to do something difficult)

- In what ways have people recently shown they appreciate you? Even small gestures "count." (e.g., a colleague asked for your help, a friend complimented you, a relative contacted you)

- When you think of your qualities, do you only think of those you don't like? What are some that you **do** like? If it's hard to answer, think of what others may say they like about you.

- Think of a time recently you felt someone was showing you that you were "bad" or unloveable.
    - Are there any possible alternative interpretations? (e.g., you misinterpreted their actions, the person is just always rude, it's that person's opinion but isn't true)

    - Could you be exaggerating what the person's actions/reactions mean? For instance, if a friend felt upset by something you said, did you jump to the conclusion that they hate you and you are a terrible person? Is there a more realistic interpretation?