Cognitive Appraisal and Reappraisal Skills

Cognitive Appraisal/Reappraisal

Cognitive appraisal and reappraisal are the ways our brains interpret events. The skills learned in this section are designed to help you understand how and why our brains interpret events the way that they do, and teach you to retrain your brain to respond to events with more flexibility and have more balanced thoughts.

Appraisals are interpretations or "automatic thoughts" - in effect, it's the way you interpret aspects of a situation.

What influences your appraisals?

- How much importance or meaning you assign to the event or situation
- What you decide to focus on in a given situation
- May incorporate experiences from the past to help with current appraisals

The body responds as if the appraisal is accurate/the worry is happening.

This is useful because it helps us to filter our experience/focus on salient information so that we can attend to potential threat and/or respond quickly/efficiently. These concepts can be used to predict what may happen in the future.

This is problematic because sometimes we get it wrong.

- Negative bias: we register negative stimuli more readily than positive and tend to dwell on it.
- Development of Thinking Traps: When our appraisals are used repeatedly and we exclude others as a result, these thoughts and styles of thinking become "TRAPS." This feeds negative emotional patterns such as anxiety and depression. Thinking traps are unhelpful thinking patterns (see handout).

Cognitive reappraisal: Involves thinking flexibly, allowing for other interpretations. There are 4 methods to this:

- "Pulling out" Thinking Traps and seeing what's left. What can you say for certain
about the situation? Develop a balanced thought based on facts only.

- What is the worst that could happen?
  - De-catastrophizing: If the worst happened, how would you cope with it.
  - Finish the story: what would happen then, and then what, etc.
- Instead of black and white thinking, what might a gray alternative be (see the Finding Alternative Thoughts handout)
- Evaluating evidence: A means of recognizing more realistic and evidence-based interpretations of an emotional situation

The goal is that repeated practice of re-appraisal helps to break the existing appraisal style and the habitual cycle of emotions. It decreases intensity and increases manageability. These new learnings rewire neural pathways, decreasing negativity bias.

General strategies for reappraisal

- Use Emotional awareness. Hit the STOP button in order to?
  - Consider your automatic appraisal as one possible option (may or may not be important)
  - Consider the role of your common thinking traps- are you using them?
  - Don’t blame yourself for having thinking traps. Now you know there’s a reason your brain is doing this and remind yourself that you’re working on it.
- Gently challenge yourself to consider other possible interpretations.
- Don’t try to stop your thoughts.” Automatic appraisals are just that, automatic. The more you try to control them, the more rigid you will become (e.g., don’t think about vanilla ice cream). Allow the thoughts to enter and pass through your mind.

What if the modified/balanced thought is still distressing? Sometimes we have to tolerate painful thoughts and the emotions that come with them. Visit distress tolerance for more details. [1]

Welcome to the third module of the retrain your brain workshop series. This workshop will cover cognitive appraisal and reappraisal skills and is part of a four part series the other workshops focus on emotional awareness, distress tolerance and behavior change, and we encourage students to watch all four modules to get the most out of it. Throughout this presentation, I will reference handouts and worksheets and you can find those linked below. Please reach out to CAPS at 9919-966-3658 if you need further support.

After watching the introductory videos titled “How does anxiety work in the brain?” and “How does depression work in the brain,” we can now begin to work on challenging the interpretations that can feed into anxiety and depression.

What are cognitive appraisals? Appraisals are interpretations or automatic thoughts. They’re the way that you interpret different aspects of a situation and a lot of different
things can influence your appraisals. These can be how much importance or meaning you assign to the event that you're experiencing or the situation. It can be what you are focusing on in that situation and you may also incorporate experiences from the past to help with current appraisals. Those could be how you manage similar experiences in the past or how those similar experiences played out in the past. And another part of it is how your body is responding to it. This can be things like anxiety. The body responds as if the appraisal is accurate or if the worry that you might be having is actually happening even if that is not the case. That can sometimes lead us to think, okay this is an actual serious threat that’s happening right now.

Let's go into a little bit of an example. In this picture if you were to look at this picture and come up with a sort of story that’s happening here, what might you think is happening? There might be some different things that come to mind but now I wonder if you were to take your first appraisal and try and come up with a different story. Would you be able to? Sometimes when I have done this workshop in person the first appraisal I might get could be you know that person might be really ill and so the other person there is her loved one who is consoling another loved one - a family member. That might be the automatic appraisal that first comes to mind but if you were to take a step back and try and come up with a different story looking at the photo, it actually is kind of an ambiguous picture. If you actually look at the cues that we were given, there’s a hug and there’s a person in bed. It could be that the woman has just woken up from a coma, or it could be that they’ve gotten good news about her diagnosis and the two are embracing out of their joy. But different things that we’ve seen, the different experiences that we’ve had, lots of different factors can play into how we would actually first go about interpreting this picture.

This is similar to how we interpret any situations that happen in our lives. If we think about appraisals and why are appraisals so important they really help us to filter our experience and focus on the most salient information so that we can attend to a potential threat and or respond quickly or efficiently. If a car is coming towards me, I want to get out of the way. I don’t really want to stop and appraise more consciously. Those automatic appraisals allow me to see the car and immediately get out of the way instead of taking my time to think about what's happening right now. They can also be helpful to predict what might happen in the future. You might use information about what has happened to you in the past to think about what is happening now and that can be really helpful so that you don't end up getting stuck on details of what's going on.

However there's a problem with appraisals and that is sometimes we get it wrong. The appraisal that you have might not always be accurate to what is actually happening. We develop styles of thinking as we focus on similar kinds of appraisals so people with emotional disorders such as anxiety and depression tend to focus on more negative or more pessimistic appraisals and sort of like a negativity bias. A lot of people have a negativity bias and that is registering negative stimuli more readily than the positive ones and tending to kind of dwell on that and instead of really picking up on all the
positive things that are happening in our lives. Sometimes it's much easier to get stuck in the negative thing that happened to that day.

The last thing is the development of thinking traps which I'm going to talk more about now. Thinking traps are things that develop when our appraisals are used repeatedly and we exclude others as a result. Those thought patterns and those styles of thinking then become traps because they're hard to break out of those and those can also feed those negative emotional patterns like anxiety and depression. This also involves generally being inflexible in your thinking and therefore it makes you more susceptible to making inaccurate assumptions because you're using the same patterns of thinking even when they might not be as applicable. Here are some examples of thinking traps. You'll also find this handout and others linked below.

If you look at these, you might notice some of these are really common patterns of thought that you might also have used before. These are used by many people. They're used by us at times - even us who work at CAPS. We have to stop and catch ourselves in our thinking traps at times. Looking at this you might recognize ones that you engage in the most. I think personally the ones that I see often are maybe all or nothing thinking. That's quite common. Also catastrophizing or minimizing different situations is really common. I wonder for you what might be the ones that stick out the most. It can be helpful to take some time to think about what your thoughts are and what thinking traps you most commonly use because then that can help you to make some changes in those ways of thinking.

That's where we come to the cognitive reappraisal piece of it. Reappraisal involves thinking more flexibly and allowing for other interpretations of the situation at hand. There are four different methods of doing so which I'm going to go through one by one.

The first one is pulling out the thinking trap from the thought that you're having. This involves thinking about what you can say for certain about a situation and then developing a more balanced thought based on the facts only. Here's an example: ?I know they're thinking about me right now. They're thinking about how weird I look.? Say you just went to a party and you decided to try something new with your style and this thought is one that comes up. If you were to take this thought and then pull out the things from this that you cannot say for certain, the things that you don't know 100% to be true, then you might come up with something a little bit more like this, ?I know they're talking but I don't know who they're talking about right now. I don't know that they're talking about me right now. And they're thinking hopefully, but I don't know what they're thinking about.? That comes up with, ?I know they're talking and they're thinking? which is a much less anxiety-producing thought.

We could do another example as well. Say the thought you're having is, ?I'm feeling nervous about this presentation. I'm going to do horribly and then I'll end up failing the class.? That's probably a common thought that comes up for folks especially going into
presentations that you might not be feeling super confident about. But if we can take that and pull out the thinking traps, you might end up with something more like this: ?I'm feeling nervous about this presentation.? You don't know what's going to happen after the presentation and you don't know how your performance will be during the presentation. We're just left with the feeling that we're having and feeling nervous about a presentation is fine. It's normal and it's the truth of what you're feeling in that moment. It's okay to sit with that feeling as you will have learned about in the emotional awareness part of this workshop series. But in this moment thinking about what is going to happen later on, how you might perform, and then making assumptions about that is less helpful.

The second way of doing this is to think about what is the worst thing that could happen when you're having a thought. In de-catastrophizing, it's thinking about, ?Okay, so if the worst happened then how would you cope with it?? Say you did do poorly on that presentation. How might you manage that afterwards? And what we see is that in thinking about how you might cope with it, then you start to realize that you could cope with it if it were to actually happen and it makes it seem like less of a catastrophic event if it were to occur. The second thing is to finish the story so say you did do poorly on that presentation, what would happen then, and then what and then what. And actually taking the time to think about how you would work through those steps and come back from that can also be really helpful in doing that.

The third and the fourth of finding an alternative and evaluating the evidence I've kind of lumped together here. In finding an alternative instead of black and white thinking maybe what might a gray alternative be to that thought, and then in evaluating the evidence that is a means of recognizing a more realistic and more evidence-based interpretation of an emotional situation. This chart here I've pulled from another one of the handouts that you can find below. It's going through when you do experience something that brings up an automatic appraisal for you and then brings up difficult emotions to deal with, then how do you identify what thinking trap is there and pull yourself out of that by reappraising the situation and by coming up with a new thought to replace the old one. We can go through a couple of examples here. So here's the first one. Say the example is that you just made an error on one of your assignments and you got it back and you saw that that was something that you'd done. The automatic appraisal that might come up for you there is, ?I can't do anything right. I'm a screw-up.? Emotions that are associated with that automatic thought could be things like shame, maybe sadness, maybe anger at yourself or somebody else. But the thinking trap there is that this is black and white thinking. You're not really looking for any kind of gray, in between thoughts. An alternative appraisal or an alternative thought might be, ?I've done a lot right during my time here. I'm qualified to be here.? Then maybe even listing the things for yourself that you have done right kind of completely countering that thought - if I can't do anything right - with ?Here you go. Here's all the evidence of all the things that I have done right.? Another example could be going through a recent breakup. An automatic thought that might come up could be I'm never going to find
someone for me. Emotions associated with that thought could be things like sadness or a feeling of defeat. The thinking trap there is an over generalization. An alternative thought could be, ?I don't really know what the future is going to hold for me in terms of my relationships but this is my situation now with this relationship.? And being able to think about it in this way allows you to then tap into some of those emotions that you might be feeling. Some of the sadness, some of the grief that you might be feeling which is normal to be feeling during a breakup.

How does reappraisal really help? What is the goal here? With repeated practice of reappraisal, you can break the existing appraisal style that might have helped in the past that kind of pattern of thinking that that we were used to before and then it can replace that with a pattern of thinking that is more helpful for now and that also helps with the habitual cycle of emotions. Those emotions that kind of build up over time and get more difficult with time because you are thinking in this way, then those can decrease in their intensity and increase in how manageable they are. The third is that new learning then rewires your neural pathways as you would have seen in the videos that preceded this video. That helps to decrease some of that negativity bias that I was talking about before.

Some general strategies for reappraisal: if you go back to the emotional awareness skills that you learned during the first module of this workshop, using that emotional awareness to hit the stop button and then consider your automatic appraisal because it is one possible option. Think about it - is this appraisal one that you want to go with, and then thinking about what are your common thinking tracks that you engage with, and are you using a thinking trap right now? Really taking the time to step back and consider what’s happening now and see if a change in thinking is something that you want to do. Then the second thing is don't blame yourself for having thinking traps. Now you know that there’s a reason that your brain is doing this and you can remind yourself that you’re working on it. And also like I was saying before these thinking traps are so normal and they are things that we all find ourselves working on at different points but it's something that is worth it to continue practicing in order to break some of those patterns and bring down some of those symptoms of anxiety and depression. Just gently challenge yourself to consider other possible interpretations like I was demonstrating in those charts before because that will help to bring yourself out of those thinking traps into a more flexible way of thinking.

The second thing is really it’s not super helpful to try and stop your thoughts because automatic appraisals are just that they’re automatic and the more you try to control those then it makes it more difficult to actually exercise that flexibility. You might become more rigid so for example if I were to tell you really not to think about something right now - so if I said don't think about strawberry ice cream right now. It would be really hard not to think about strawberry ice cream right now. And so instead, a more helpful way to do this is kind of to practice the mindfulness that you learned during the emotional awareness module as well and allow the thoughts to enter and allow them to
pass through your mind and take control over them. Not really trying to stop them but to say, "Okay I'm having this thought right now. What do I want to do with that??

And then finally in thinking about some of these thoughts that you might be having, say you are reappraising the thought. Say you're trying to find the evidence for this thought and the more modified or the more balanced thought that comes up is still distressing. At that point, we're needing to think about how to accept some painful thoughts because there won't always be a less anxiety producing thought. After going through a reappraisal sometimes the anxiety that you're experiencing or the depression or the sadness might be justified. Sometimes we have to tolerate those painful thoughts and the emotions that come with them. In order to tolerate them going through the full workshop series here can help you to learn some tips on how to do that.

Then lastly what could be helpful moving on from here? Now that you've learned how to reappraise your automatic thoughts, the homework that I would give you would be to practice finding those alternative thoughts. You can start this more retroactively. At the end of the day you might think back on your day and think about what were some points during my day that I was feeling really anxious or feeling really depressed. Was I having a thought that was not totally accurate? Can I sit down and even using that chart, record it? Put down the thought that you were experiencing and try and come up with an alternate thought. Maybe then you might find some patterns in your thinking. As well you might pick up on what are those thinking traps that I find myself in quite often. Then as you do that and learn more about yourself and learn more about your patterns of thinking and then challenge those, you will be able to retrain your brain.

Thank you so much for viewing this video on cognitive appraisal and reappraisal. Be sure to check out the other three videos of this workshop series next.

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