**Stress GPS**

**Week 2 – Stress and Our Thoughts**

**What is Anxious Thinking?**

Anxiety is a feeling that’s prone to both physical and emotional consequences. It causes you to feel as though there are things you cannot control, fear various problems that may not even exist, and worry about things more than they deserve.

Negative thinking is the cornerstone of anxiety. Many people with chronic anxiety have severe problems with anxious and irrational thinking – thoughts that many know are irrational, and yet they struggle to convince themselves of a more logical and reasoned response. At its heart, those that deal with anxiety are often trying to control and contain severe negative thoughts that can have a drastic impact on their overall quality of life. These negative thoughts are often referred to as cognitive distortions, but we may also think of them as rigid thoughts or hyperactive-protective thinking patterns.

Everyone engages in protective thinking patterns on occasion. Our brains sometimes does this to regain a sense of control and find answers in confusing or uncertain circumstances. For example, if we feel like we are struggling with something that other people seem not to (and they might appear that way for many reasons [i.e. they don’t talk about it or they cope with it privately]) our brain might try to reason “something must be wrong with me,” in order to have a “logical” answer. When we access these protective thinking patterns more often than not in stressful situations, they go into hyper-drive and it can be difficult to find alternative perspectives.

Protective thinking patterns are often exaggerated or irrational thought patterns that are believed to perpetuate the effects of psychological states, especially depression and anxiety. Protective thinking patterns are simply ways that our mind convinces us of something that isn’t really true. These sometimes inaccurate thoughts are usually used to reinforce negative thinking or emotions – telling ourselves things that sound rational and accurate, but really only serve to keep us feeling bad about ourselves. Through examining some of our thinking patterns, we can begin to develop strategies to challenge and change them.

**Some Stress Response Symptoms**

Here is a list of common physical, emotional, thought, and behavioral stress responses that one might experience during times of stress or when experiencing “Fight, Flight, Freeze”

**Physical Responses**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| * Muscle aches * ↑ Heart rate * Weight Gain * Weight Loss * Constipation * Muscle Twitching * Low Energy * Tight Chest * Dizziness * Stomach Cramps * Insomnia | * Headache * Nausea * Dry Mouth * Weakness * Diarrhea * Trembling * Chills * Sweating * Choking Feeling * Leg Cramps * Hot Flashes | * Pounding Heart * Chest Pain * Numb or Tingling Hands/Feet * ↑ Blood Pressure * Dry Throat * Face Flushing * Feeling Faint * Neck Pain * ↑ Urination * Light Headedness |

**Emotional and Thought Responses**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| * Restlessness * Agitation * Worthlessness * Depression * Guilt * Anger * Nightmares * Sensitivity | * Numbness * Mood Swings * ↓ Concentration * Preoccupation * Insecurity * Anxiety - Stress * Depression * Hopelessness | * Defensiveness * Racing Thoughts * Intense Thinking * Expecting the Worst * Lack of Motivation * Forgetfulness * Rigidity * Intolerance |

**Behavioral Responses**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| * Avoidance * Neglect * ↑ Smoking * Poor Appearance * ↑Spending * ↓ Eating * Nail Biting * ↑ Talking * Sexual Problems | * Fidgeting * ↓ Exercise * Aggressive Speaking * ↑ Sleeping * ↓ Relaxing activities * Withdrawal * ↑ Alcohol use * ↑ Eating * Arguing | * Poor Hygiene * Seeking Reassurance * Skin Picking * ↑ Body checking * Foot Tapping * Rapid Walking * Teeth Clenching * Multitasking * ↓ Fun activities |

**Hyperactive Protective Thinking Patterns**

**(Also known as Cognitive Distortions)**

1. **All-or-nothing thinking (Polarized or “Black and White” Thinking)**

You see things in black and white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure

1. **Over-Generalization**

You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.

1. **Mental Filter**

You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened

1. **Discounting the Positive**

You reject positive experiences by insisting they “don’t count” for some reason or other. You maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences

1. **Jumping to Conclusions**

You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion

1. **Mind Reading –** you arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you and don’t bother to check it out
2. **Fortune Telling** – you anticipate that things will turn out badly and feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact
3. **Magnification (Catastrophizing) or Minimization**

You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up or someone else’s achievement), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or another person’s imperfections)

1. **Emotional Reasoning**

You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are:   
“I feel it, therefore it must be true”

1. **“Should” Statements**

You try to motivate yourself with “should”s and “shouldn’t”s (i.e. “I should be working right now”). “Must”s and “Ought”s are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements towards others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.

1. **Labeling and mislabeling**

This is an extreme form of over-generalization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: “I’m a loser.” When someone else’s behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to them, “They are a jerk.” Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.

1. **Personalization**

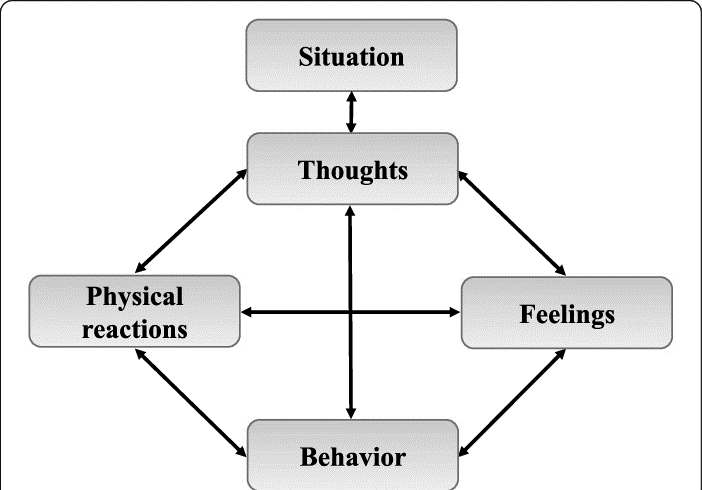
You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event for which, in fact, you were not primarily responsible

**Cognitive Diamond (Triangle)**

Often, when we go throughout our life, we are operating in autopilot mode – feeling emotions, thinking automatic thoughts, and reacting with behaviors without being fully aware or tuned into the whole process of what’s going on. This can be very problematic for us if our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are particularly negative or destructive. We can try to change this process by understanding the Cognitive Diamond (triangle)

The Cognitive Diamond (triangle) is simply a diagram that depicts how our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are all interconnected with each other, and influence one another. Therefore, you can change, or at least influence, one by changing another. It doesn’t matter which one you start with (hence it being triangular in nature, rather than linear or even circular). For example, you can influence the way you feel about something by changing behaviors or by changing your thoughts, whichever one is the easiest or makes the most sense for you to start with.

Often, our thoughts are triggered by situations. Identifying how various situations trigger different automatic thoughts can help us gain insight into our reactions and when we might need to use different skills to cope effectively or decrease frequency/intensity of negative thinking/emotions/behavior.

Also, our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can trigger various physical reactions and vice versa. We can use T. I. P. P. skills to help alter our process throughout the Cognitive Diamond (triangle)

**10 Ways to Untwist Our Thinking**

1. **Identify the Distortion**

Write down your negative thoughts so you can see which of the 10 thinking patterns you’re involved in. This will make it easier to think about the problem in a more positive and realistic way.

1. **Examine the Evidence**

Instead of assuming that your negative thought is true, examine the actual evidence for it. For example, if you feel that you never do anything right, you could list several things you have done successfully (Like apply and get into college!).

1. **The Double-Standard Method**

Instead of putting yourself down in a harsh, condemning way, talk to yourself in the same compassionate way you would talk to a friend with a similar problem

1. **The Experimental Technique**

Do an experiment to test the validity of your negative thought. For example, if during an episode of panic, you become terrified that you’re about to die of a heart attack, you could jog or run up and down several flights of stairs. This will prove that your heart is healthy and strong.

1. **Thinking in Shades of Grey**

Instead of thinking about your problems in all-or-nothing extremes, evaluate things on a scale of 0-100. When things don’t work out as well as you hoped, think about the experience as a partial success rather than a complete failure. See what you can learn from the situation.

1. **The Survey Method**

Ask people questions to find out if your thoughts and attitudes are realistic. For example, if you feel that public speaking anxiety is abnormal and shameful, ask several friends if they ever felt nervous before they gave a talk.

1. **Define Terms**

When you label yourself “inferior” or “a fool” or “a loser,” ask “What is the definition of ‘a fool’?” An examination of these and other global labels may reveal that they more closely represent specific behaviors, or an identifiable behavior pattern, instead of the total person.

1. **The Semantic Method**

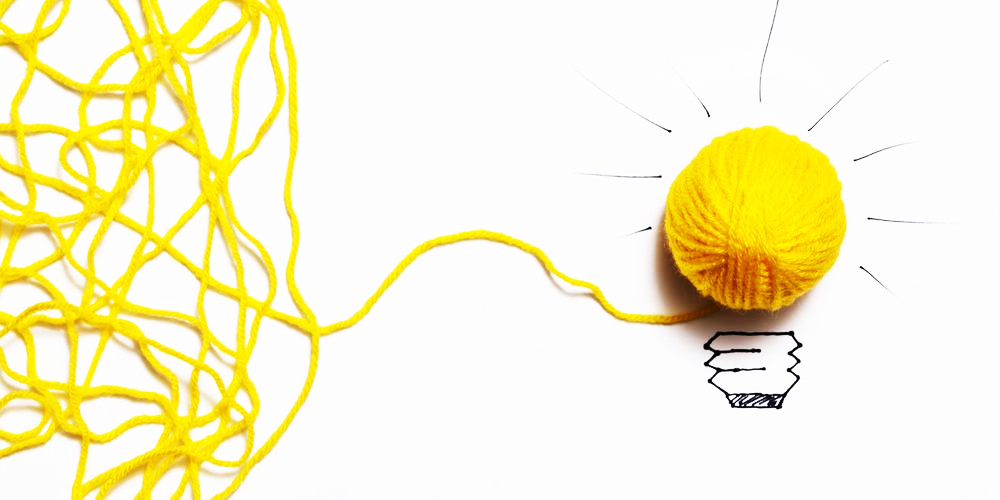
Simply substitute language that is less colorful and emotionally loaded. This method is helpful for “should” statements. Instead of telling yourself “I shouldn’t have made that mistake,” you can say, “It would have been better if I hadn’t made that mistake.”

1. **Re-attribution**

Instead of automatically assuming that you are “bad” and blaming yourself entirely for a problem, think about the many factors that have contributed to it. Focus on solving the problem instead of using up all your energy blaming yourself and feeling guilty.

1. **Cost-Benefit Analysis**

List the advantages and disadvantages of a feeling (like getting angry when your plane is late), a negative thought (like “No matter how hard I try, I always screw up”), or a behavior pattern (like overeating and lying around in bed when you’re depressed). You can also use the cost benefit analysis to modify a self-defeating belief such as,” I must always try to be perfect.”



**Stress GPS**

**Week 2**

**Home Practice**

1. **Describe 2 situations in which you had some anxious/stressful thoughts. What thinking pattern (cognitive distortion) were you using? Which strategies did you use to untwist these thoughts?**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Anxiety/Stress**  **Provoking Thoughts** | **Thinking Pattern**  **(Cognitive Distortion)**  **Used** | **Strategy for**  **Untwisting Thought** |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

1. **How did these techniques work? Pros/Cons? Will you use them again?**

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**Sitting Meditation: Thoughts**

Begin by settling in your chair, closing your eyes if you chose to. Sitting with a calm, dignified, and wakeful presence, with your spine straight and your body relaxed. Take a moment to let yourself become aware of yourself here in this room at this moment. Allowing awareness of your body here in the chair.

Now gathering the attention and bringing it to your breath: the inbreath, the outbreath, the waves of breath as they enter and leave your body. Not looking for anything to happen or for any special state or experience, just continuing to stay with the sensations of breathing for the next few moments.

Now letting the breath fade into the background, allowing your awareness to focus on the thoughts that arise in your mind, and letting it naturally pass by, and the next thought, allowing that to pass by too, without becoming involved in it or following it.

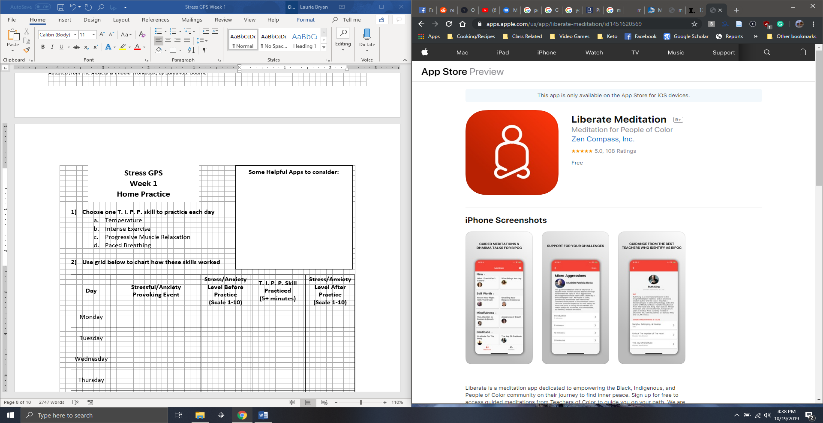
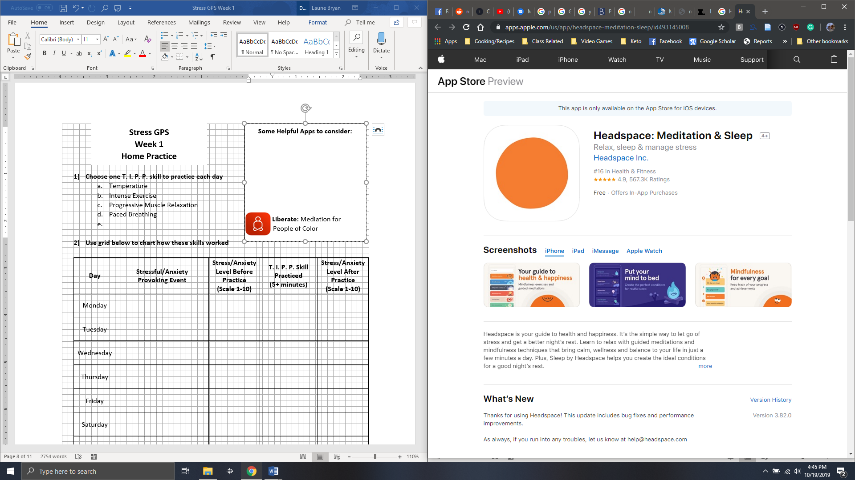
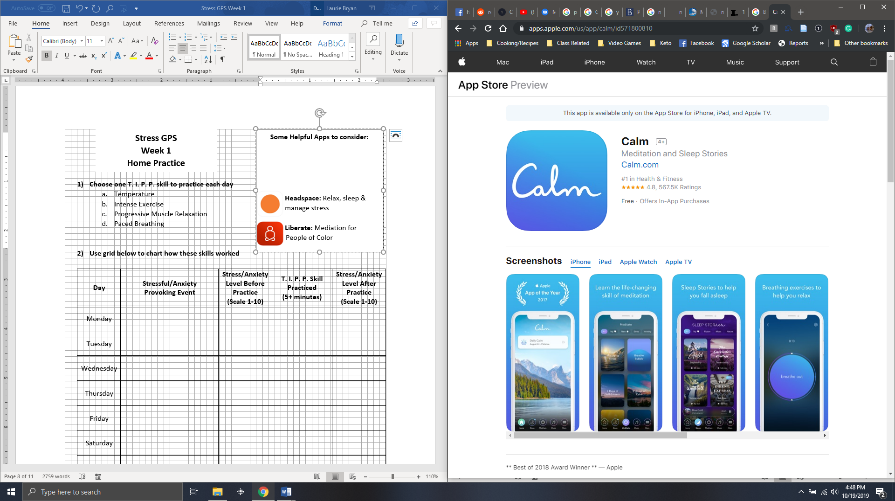
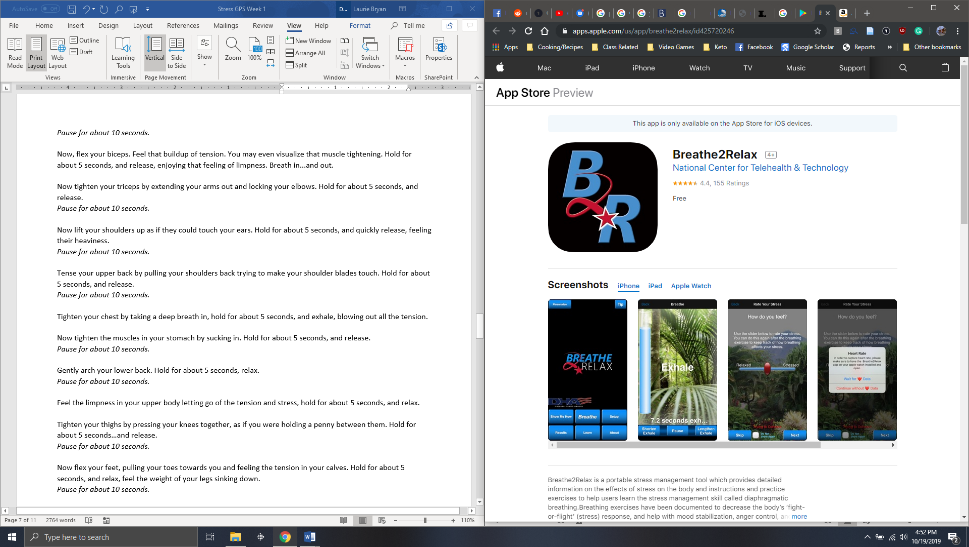
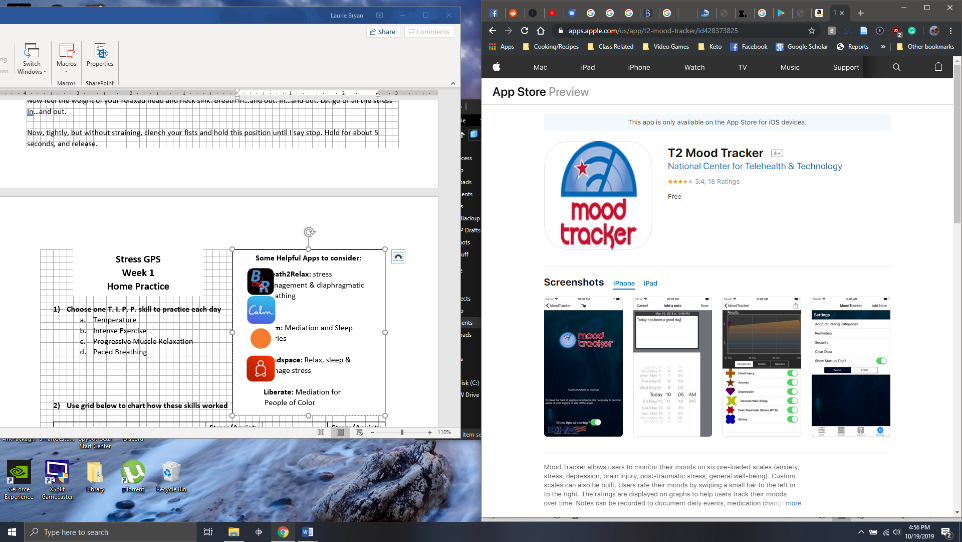
You might imagine that you are sitting by a stream. Take a moment now to picture this stream in your mind. Now, as thoughts begin to arise, imagine you are sitting on the shore, watching them float by as though they were leaves on the water. As you become aware of each thought that appears, just gently allow it to float by. The thoughts might be words or an image or a sentence. Some thoughts might be larger or heavier, some smaller, quicker, or lighter. Whatever form the thought is in, as the next one appears, do the same – allowing it to float by. Just doing your best with this. If you find that you are worrying about what it should look like or whether you are doing this right, just notice that these, too, are thoughts on the passing stream. If thoughts come quickly, you might picture the stream rushing with white water. As the thoughts calm down, the stream might slow down and flow more smoothly.

If you find that you become lost in a thought or your attention has wandered, you might congratulate yourself for becoming aware again, noticing, if possible, what thought pulled you away an then simply beginning again, brining your awareness back to observing your thoughts.

If you find yourself following the thoughts, as often happens, as soon as you notice that they have carried you away from the present, simply stepping out of the stream brings your attention back to sitting on the bank observing.

Something you might try here is labeling thoughts as they appear. Maybe they are judgements about yourself, your experience, or of how you are doing in this exercise. If so, just label that thought as “judgement” and let it pass. Perhaps you have a memory arise. If so, you might just label it as “memory.” Or perhaps plans come to mind about what you are going to do after today’s session or what you are going to say to someone in the future. Often fantasies come to mind. We imagine scenarios that might happen or that we would like to happen. Just recognize the thought as judgements, memories, plans, fantasies, or any labels that work for you, and allow the thoughts to pass. Try practicing this now. If no labels come to mind, that’s ok too. You might use the label “thought” or simply notice that no labels come to mind and continue to observe.

**Week 1 Highlights – Stress and the Body**

* **Fight, Flight, Freeze Response** (stress response): a survival response from the body originally intended to help keep us alive in times of life-threatening circumstance (ex. tiger attack)
  + Society evolved faster than our brains and now sometimes the Fight, Flight, Freeze response (stress response) is activated during relatively mundane situations (ex. tests, interpersonal problems, etc.)
* **T. I. P. P. Skills** are used to change the chemistry of our body to activate the Relaxation Response (the opposite of the stress response)
  + **Temperature**
    - Cold: hold ice cubes, splash cold water on face, lie down on cool tiles
    - Hot: hot shower, warm face cloth, drink hot beverage
  + **Intense Exercise** 
    - Jumping jacks, running in place or down the hall, exercise at the gym
  + **Progressive Muscle Relaxation** 
    - Tense muscles slowly and then relax, from toes all the way up to the forehead and back down again
    - Alternatively, you may be holding tension in your body already that you’re not aware off. Scan your body from toes all the way up to your forehead. When you notice you are holding tension in different parts of your body, try to relax that part before moving up or down to the next part
  + **Paced Breathing**
    - Inhale for 4 seconds
    - Hold for 2 seconds
    - Exhale for 6 seconds

**Some Helpful Apps to consider:**

**Breath2Relax:** stress management &

diaphragmatic breathing

**T2 Mood Tracker:** Monitor moods

**Calm:** Mediation and Sleep Stories

**Headspace:** Relax, sleep & manage stress

**Liberate:** Mediation for People of Color

* + - Hold for 2 seconds
    - Repeat 3-4 times
* **Progressive Muscle Relaxation Practice**
* **Gratitudes**