

# The psychotherapy file: an aid to understanding ourselves better (extended version)

In our life what has happened to us, and the sense we made of this, colours the way we see ourselves and others. How we see things is for us how things are, and how we go about our lives seems 'obvious and right'. Sometimes, however, our familiar ways of understanding and acting can be the source of our problems. In order to solve our difficulties we may need to learn to recognise how what we do makes things worse. We can then work out new ways of thinking and acting to change things for the better.

These pages are intended to suggest ways of thinking about what you do; recognising your particular patterns is the first step in learning to gain more control and happiness in your life. You should discuss this questionnaire with your counsellor or therapist.

## Keeping a diary of moods and behaviour

Symptoms, bad moods, unwanted thoughts or behaviours that come and go can be better understood and controlled if you learn to notice when they happen and what starts them off.

If you have a particular symptom or problem of this sort, start keeping a diary. The diary should be focused on a particular mood, symptom

or behaviour, and should be kept every day if possible. Try to record this sequence:

- 1 How you were feeling about yourself and others and the world before the problem came on.
- 2 Any external event, or any thought or image in your mind that was going on when the trouble started, or what seemed to start it off.
- 3 The thoughts, images or feelings you experienced once the trouble started.

By noticing and writing down in this way what you do and think at these times, you will learn to recognise and eventually have more control over how you act and think at the time. It is often the case that bad feelings like resentment, depression or physical symptoms are the result of ways of thinking and acting that are unhelpful. Diary-keeping in this way gives you the chance to learn better ways of dealing with things.

It is helpful to keep a daily record for 1–2 weeks, then to discuss what you have recorded with your therapist or co-counsellor.

## Starting to change

You may get quite depressed when you begin to realise how often you stop your life being happier and more fulfilled. It is important to remember that it's not being stupid or bad, but rather that:

- 1 We do these things because this is the way we learned to manage best when we were younger.
- 2 We don't have to keep on doing them now we are learning to recognise them.
- 3 By changing our behaviour, we can learn to control not only our own behaviour, but we also change the way other people behave to us.
- 4 Although it may seem that others resist the changes we want for ourselves (for example, our parents or our partners), we often underestimate them; if we are firm about our right to change, those who care for us will usually accept the change.

## Working with the psychotherapy file

There are certain patterns of thinking and acting that do not achieve what we want, but which are hard to change. Look through the descriptions of traps, dilemmas, snags and difficult states on the following pages and

mark how far you think they apply to the way you feel. Some will be familiar, others will not. If a description feels familiar but is not quite right cross out the words that do not apply and write in how things are for you in your life. **Remember there is no way of doing this badly or of getting it wrong.** Discuss what you have discovered with your therapist or co-counsellor. You and he/she can work together to work out what your unhelpful patterns are and get the descriptions as accurate as possible as the first step towards making helpful changes.

## Traps

Traps are things we cannot escape from. Certain kinds of thinking and acting result in a 'vicious circle' when, however hard we try, things seem to get worse instead of better. Trying to deal with feeling bad about ourselves, we think and act in ways that tend to confirm our badness.

Applies strongly ++

Applies +

Does not apply 0

### *1 Fear of hurting others trap*

Feeling that it is wrong to be angry or aggressive we can be afraid of hurting other people's feelings so we don't express our feelings or needs with the result that we are ignored or abused which makes us feel angry; this confirms feeling that it is wrong to be angry.

**Applies:**

### *2 Negative thinking trap*

Feeling that we will mess up tasks, relationships or social situations we can believe that if we try we will do it badly, so when we do try we are ineffective and things go wrong; we often feel that things went disastrously which confirms the feeling that we will always mess things up.

**Applies:**

### *3 Anxious thinking trap*

Anxious that we won't be able to cope with tasks, relationships or social situations we worry that we will mess things up and we anxiously

worry about getting things right, resulting in panicking, stress and exhaustion; this makes us feel more anxious about things.

**Applies:**

#### *4 Trying to please trap*

Feeling uncertain about ourselves and wanting to be liked we try to please others by doing what they seem to want with the result that they take advantage of us; we can feel angry and used but also as if we have failed to please, which confirms our uncertainty about ourselves.

**Applies:**

#### *5 Can't say 'no' trap*

Feeling that it is impossible to say 'no' to others leads to feeling out of control in relationships so to feel more in control we avoid others by hiding away or letting them down with the result that they get angry and can reject us; we then feel guilty which confirms that we shouldn't say 'no' to others.

**Applies:**

#### *6 Avoiding upset trap*

Feeling anxious and believing that we mustn't upset or displease others we avoid upset by doing what they seem to want, anxiously trying to please them; as a result others don't get upset, we feel relieved but trapped in not upsetting others.

**Applies:**

#### *7 Social isolation trap*

Feeling that others may find us stupid or boring we lack confidence in social situations and feel anxious, so we don't approach others or respond when others approach us; as a result others may see us as unfriendly and go away which confirms our feeling that we are stupid or boring.

**Applies:**

#### *8 Worthlessness trap*

Feeling that we can't ever get what we want or have what we need, it can feel that if we try to get needs met we will be punished, rejected

or abandoned; sometimes it feels as if we have been born cursed. We give up trying and feel hopeless and helpless and can even feel suicidal, as if everything is impossible.

**Applies:**

### 9 Self-punishment trap

Feeling bad, weak or guilty, we can feel agitated or upset and feel as if we must punish ourselves. We can hurt or harm ourselves in different ways that can make the feelings of badness or guilt go away briefly but only confirms that we are bad and should be punished.

**Applies:**

Dilemmas (false choices and narrow options)

We often act as we do, even when we are not completely happy with it, because the only other ways we can imagine seem as bad or even worse. Sometimes we assume connections that are not necessarily the case – as in ‘If I do x then y will follow’. These false choices can be described as *either/or* or *if/then* dilemmas. We often don’t realise that we see things like this, but we act as if these were the only possible choices. Do you act as if any of the following false choices rule your life? Recognising them is the first step to changing them.

Applies strongly ++

Applies +

Does not apply 0

### 1 Upset feelings dilemma

When I feel upset *either* I bottle up my feelings, others don’t notice that I’m upset and so ignore me or take advantage of me or abuse me, *or* I express my feelings, sometimes explosively, and others feel hurt, attacked, overwhelmed or threatened and respond by attacking me or rejecting me.

**Applies:**

### 2 Deprivation dilemma

When I feel needy *either* I spoil myself, take what I want or get what I need and then feel guilty or greedy as if depriving others and then feel

cross with myself, bad and frustrated, *or* I deny myself things and don't ask for what I want or need and feel modest and self-righteous, as if giving to others and then feel as if I am punishing myself.

**Applies:**

### *3 Perfectionism dilemma*

Feeling inadequate or not good enough, *either* I try to be perfect, which is impossible and very stressful and leaves me feeling an exhausted angry failure, *or* I just let things slide and feel guilty for not trying and feel like an angry and dissatisfied failure.

**Applies:**

### *4 Dealing with demands and criticism dilemma*

Feeling bullied or criticised, *either* I gloomily submit to demands and feel trapped and crushed, miserable and hopeless, *or* I passively resist demands, put things off, drag my feet and feel anxious but still get criticised and bullied.

**Applies:**

### *5 Sabotage or rebellion dilemma*

Feeling bullied or criticised, *either* I secretly resist demands and sabotage what is demanded of me but end up attacked and bullied, *or* I actively rebel against demands and attack others and destroy things and feel hopeless and end up feeling trapped and punished, a hollow victory.

**Applies:**

### *6 Responsibility dilemma*

Feeling over-responsible, *either* I look after others, take charge, meet their expectations of help and feel needed but also taken advantage of and can feel angry and trapped (even though I'm in control) *or* I don't look after others, don't take charge, others don't expect me to do things for them and I feel unwanted, rejected or without a role and can feel lonely, anxious and out of control.

**Applies:**

### 7 Self-sufficiency dilemma

Feeling that I should be self-sufficient or that I shouldn't want or need anything, if I reach out for what I want and get it I feel childish, guilty and undeserving as if I shouldn't want things, that I should contain myself; *on the other hand*, if I don't reach out or don't get what I want I can feel angry and deprived (as well as saintly) and that I should have the things that I want or need and that I should be more assertive.

**Applies:**

### 8 Anxious control dilemma

Feeling anxious about what may happen I try to keep things, feelings, plans in perfect order, pay obsessive attention to details in order to keep in control but feel exhausted and overwhelmed by the endless tasks and so feel like letting go and giving up; *on the other hand*, if I let things go and get into a mess by avoiding or ignoring things then the brief relief is followed by feeling anxious and panicky about the mess and I feel an urgent need to get back into control.

**Applies:**

### 9 Not knowing how to react in relationships dilemma

Feeling unsure how to act towards others, *either* I stick up for myself too much, don't join in or take my turn and find that others reject me or don't like me which leaves me feeling confused and unhappy, *or* I give in and do too much to try to please others and get taken advantage of and end up feeling angry or hurt.

**Applies:**

### 10 Approval vs. feelings dilemma

I want to express my feelings but also need approval from others so mostly I feel I have to bottle up my feelings in order to be approved of or accepted, so I don't cry or be angry or tender or playful with the result that I am accepted or approved of but feel frustrated and cut off; *on the other hand*, when I express my feelings, be myself or do what I want or need, I can feel childish or rebellious and angry with the result

that I am often rejected or disapproved of and feel my feelings and needs are unrecognised.

**Applies:**

### *11 Approval vs. independence dilemma*

I want to be independent but also need approval from others so mostly I feel I have to do what they want to be approved of or accepted, I have to submit and can't be myself or do what I want, I feel accepted but at the same time frustrated and miserable; *on the other hand*, when I do what I want and be myself I can feel rebellious and angry and am often rejected or unrecognised, disapproved of and unacceptable to others.

**Applies:**

### *12 If involved then smothered dilemma*

It is as if when I get involved with or too close to others I can feel smothered, engulfed or taken over by them and then feel suffocated, trapped and desperate, so I keep distant and feel safe with breathing space and room to move but can also feel lonely and miserable.

**Applies:**

### *13 If involved then abused dilemma*

I fear that if I get involved with others I will be abused, so when I get involved I can easily feel taken advantage of or used and feel angry or miserable, *or* I don't get involved and feel safe but also feel lonely and miserable.

**Applies:**

### *14 If involved then admiring dilemma*

I feel that I need a lot of attention so I seek others whom I can admire or who will admire me which feels good; *on the other hand*, often this does not last and then I don't admire them, in fact I often feel contempt towards them; or find that they are contemptuous and rejecting of me which can leave me feeling bad or worthless so I seek a new relationship.

**Applies:**

## Snags

Snags are what is happening when we say 'I want to have a better life, or I want to change my behavior but ...'. Sometimes this comes from how we or our families thought about us when we were young; such as 'she was always the good child', or 'in our family we never ...'. Sometimes the snags come from the important people in our lives not wanting us to change, or not able to cope with what our changing means to them. Often the resistance is more indirect, as when a parent, husband or wife becomes ill or depressed when we begin to get better. In other cases we seem to 'arrange' to avoid pleasure or success, or if they come, we have to pay in some way, by depression, or by spoiling things. Often this is because, as children, we came to feel guilty if things went well for us, or felt that we were envied for good luck or success. Sometimes we have come to feel responsible, unreasonably, for things that went wrong in the family, although we may not be aware that this is so. It is helpful to learn to recognise how this sort of pattern is stopping you getting on with your life, for only then can you learn to accept your right to a better life and begin to claim it.

Indicate by ringing the number if you recognise that you feel limited in your life:

- 1 By fear of the response of others: for example, I must sabotage success
  - a as if it deprives others
  - b as if others may envy me or
  - c as if there are not enough good things to go around.
- 2 By something inside yourself: for example, I must sabotage good things as if I don't deserve them.

## Difficult and unstable states of mind

Some people find it difficult to keep control over their behaviour and experience because things feel very difficult and different at times. Indicate by ringing the number which, if any, of the following apply to you:

- 1 How I feel about myself and others can be unstable; I can switch from one state of mind to a completely different one.
- 2 Some states may be accompanied by intense, extreme and uncontrollable emotions.

- 3 Some states may be accompanied by emotional blankness, feeling unreal or feeling muddled.
- 4 Some states may be accompanied by feeling intensely guilty or angry with myself, wanting to hurt myself.
- 5 Some states may be accompanied by feeling that others can't be trusted, are going to let me down, or hurt me.
- 6 Some states may be accompanied by being unreasonably angry or hurtful to others.
- 7 Sometimes the only way to cope with some confusing feelings is to blank them off and feel emotionally distant from others.

### Different states

Everybody experiences changes in how they feel about themselves and the world. But for some people these changes are extreme, sometimes sudden and confusing. In such cases there are often a number of states which recur, and learning to recognise them and shifts between them can be very helpful. On the next page are a number of descriptions of such states. Identify those which you experience by ringing round them. You can delete or add words to the descriptions, and there is space to add any not listed. If one state that you have ringed round leads on to another, join them with a line.

zombie – cut off from feelings or from others, disconnected	feeling bad but soldiering on, coping	raging and out of control	extra special – looking down on others, unrecognised genius	control freak – in control of self, of life, of other people	cheated by life, by others, untrusting	hiding secret shame
provoking, teasing, seducing, winding-up others	clinging, frantic, fearing abandonment	frenetically active, too busy to think or feel	agitated, confused, anxious, panicking, desperate	feeling perfectly cared for, blissfully close to another	misunderstood, rejected, abandoned, desolate	hurt, humiliated, defeated, always in the wrong
contemptuously dismissive of myself, worthless	vulnerable, needy, passively helpless, waiting for rescue	envious, wanting to harm others, put them down, knock them down	protective, respecting myself, respecting others	hurting myself, hurting others, causing harm or damage	resentfully submitting to demands, a slave, under the thumb	frightened of angry others
secure in myself, able to be close to others	intensely critical of myself, and of others	cheating others, cheating the system, lying, hiding the truth	feeling hopeless, no one can help, life is pointless, suicidal	spaced out – distanced from others, as if acting a part, double-glazed	flying away, running away, escaping	overwhelmed by grief and loss
seeking revenge, stalking, harassing, murderous	knight in shining armour rescuing others, righting wrongs	as if poisoned or contaminated	like an unexploded bomb	watchful, suspicious, jealous, paranoid		

Figure CW.1 Different states

