Downward Arrow Technique

CBT: Finding the Belief Under a Painful Thought

The downward arrow technique helps you dig beneath an upsetting thought to find the deeper belief that gives it its power. Psychiatrist David Burns made the technique well known in his 1980 book Feeling Good, where he called it the vertical arrow. Cognitive behavioral therapists use it to uncover core beliefs. Instead of arguing with a thought, you ask what it would mean if it were true, and then you ask again.

1 How the arrow works

Start with a thought that upset you. Ask, "If that were true, what would it mean to me?" Write the answer underneath, and ask the same question about that answer. Keep going until you reach a belief about yourself, other people, or the world that feels basic and familiar.

Step	Example
Upsetting thought	*My friend hasn't answered my text all day.*
What would that mean?	*She must be annoyed with me.*
What would that mean?	*I must have said something wrong again.*
What would that mean?	*I always end up pushing people away.*
The belief underneath	*I am hard to like.*

Why does this work? *Everyday thoughts often rest on a few deep beliefs that formed earlier in life. These beliefs can make small events feel much bigger than they are. Once you can name the belief, you can look at it, question it, and build a more balanced one with practice.*

2 Questions to keep the arrow going

- If that were true, what would it mean to me?
- What would be the worst part about that?
- What does that say about me, or about other people?
- If that happened, what am I afraid would happen next?

You can stop when your answers start to repeat, or when you reach a belief that brings a strong feeling. Common ones are "I'm not good enough," "I'm unlovable," and "I'm helpless."

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*

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3 Follow your own arrow

What happened?

My upsetting thought:

If that were true, what would it mean?

And if that were true, what would it mean?

And what would that mean?

The belief underneath:

4 Look at the belief

Where might this belief have come from?

What experiences do not fit this belief?

A more balanced belief I could practice:

Example: Some people like me a lot, and one quiet day does not change that.

Core beliefs can be painful to look at, and they take time to change. A CBT therapist can help you work with them gently and safely.

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