

## **Week 2/Video 2: Habits & Automatic Thoughts**

If you are depressed then there are probably a couple of things from the “How to Do a ‘Good’ Depression” list that you do. You may have said to yourself, “I know I should get out of bed and go to class but I just can’t.” You may have asked yourself, “Why do I keep doing this?”

Before you go further down the spiral of beating yourself up for feeling stuck, let’s talk about habits. In general, whether one is depressed or not, many of our thoughts and behaviors are not driven by conscious intention, but by habits in thinking and behaving.

Habits are originally formed by what is immediately pleasurable, avoids pain, and what we’ve done in the past. However, as we keep repeating a thought or behavior, the habit is strengthened more by repetition. Unfortunately, the part of our brain that controls habits does not distinguish between good and bad or helpful and unhelpful thoughts or behaviors; thus, we maintain the thought or behavior even when we know that it is not helpful. In other words, we get stuck.

We’re going to take a few minutes now to focus more on our thought patterns and their influence on maintaining depressive symptoms. In this workshop, we’d like to talk specifically about automatic thoughts, which are the thoughts and/or images that automatically pop into our heads, as if they were a reflex. We don’t choose for them to happen, they just do. These automatic thoughts can be helpful or unhelpful and can impact the way we feel or further think about things.

Unhelpful automatic thoughts can perpetuate the experience of depression. Here’s an example of an automatic thought and the feeling that goes with them.

Imagine you’re walking on campus and someone doesn’t acknowledge you when you say “hi.” You have the thought “they must not like me” or you have the thought “maybe they didn’t hear me.” Can you see how having the unhelpful thought “they must not like me” elicits different emotional or behavioral reactions than the more helpful thought “maybe they didn’t hear me?”

How do you think your responses might be different? How do you think you would feel or act if you had either of these thoughts?

You may feel hurt if you think they don’t like you, you might generalize the thought to “nobody likes me,” and may end up isolating from others. Conversely, you might just brush it off if you think they probably just didn’t hear you.

From just this one example, we agree that it would be easy to feel sad, upset, hurt, etc. if we had the thought “they must not like me.” With depression, this pattern of unhelpful automatic thoughts can occur repeatedly, as if you're live-streaming your perceived flaws and mistakes. This pattern of unhelpful thinking can be incessant and very hard to turn off. It can lead to low emotions, behavioral changes, and physical sensations, all perpetuating the experience of depression.

Let's revisit your homework, considering everything we've just talked about. Reviewing your cross sectional formulation homework (or using an example from your workbook), is it possible that any of the thoughts listed were unhelpful automatic thoughts? If so, can you identify which ones? As we keep practicing these tools and increasing your awareness, you may notice some patterns in your thoughts. Some types of thoughts happen more often than others. More on that next video.