

# Acting positively in difficult situations

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## **Purpose**

Many outwardly confident and able people lack confidence in particular situations. Examples include: 'fast trackers' who may say nothing at meetings because everyone else there is 'older', 'wiser' and perhaps 'male' (often said by young women) and are scared of 'looking foolish'; and specialists, whose training leads them to be confident only when they 'know the answer for sure'. This exercise helps the client to break the negative cycle of lack of confidence leading to ineffective action that has built up, and to replace it with positive action.

## **Description**

The exercise enables the client to identify the negative thoughts they habitually engage in and how these link to ineffective action. It then shows ways of breaking the negative cycle, by replacing the negative thoughts with positive thoughts, which then enable the person to manage the negative feelings that the thought process created. The exercise has its roots in cognitive-behavioural coaching and is a simple version borrowed from assertiveness training.

## **Process**

Write on a flip chart the hierarchy Situation, Thoughts, Feelings, Actions with regard to a situation relevant to the

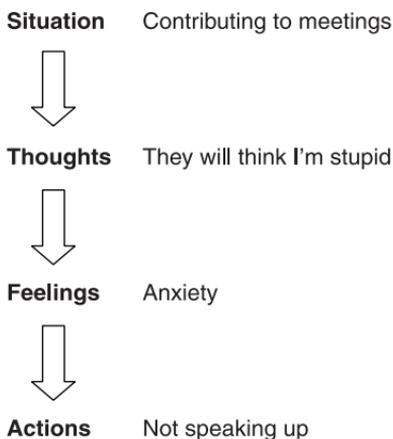
client, as shown in Figure 1. Here we are using the example of contributing to meetings.

Then work through the hierarchy, asking the client relevant questions at each level, writing their answers to the right. For example, ‘What sorts of thoughts go through your mind in these meetings?’ (‘Well, that they all know far more than me; if I say anything, I’ll look foolish’); ‘How do you feel?’ (‘I feel unconfident and anxious’); ‘As a result, how do you act?’ (‘I don’t say anything’). The client will then begin to realise the negative, self-defeating cycle they engage in – this can be represented on the flip chart by drawing arrows through the written answers from thoughts, to feelings, to actions and from actions back to the thoughts.

Then move to two ways of breaking the cycle:

- **Breaking the negative thought**

You may ask the client: ‘If you took the negative voice out of your head, what positive thoughts could you play to yourself that would be realistic?’. The client may respond by stating: ‘I bring a different perspective’; ‘I wouldn’t have been asked if I had nothing to contribute’. Write on the left of the cycle, following through with similar questions at the levels of feelings and actions, to show a positive, reinforcing cycle, similarly completed with arrows.



**Figure 1** The negative cycle

- **Breaking the negative feelings**

Encourage the client to practise consciously setting their non-verbal behaviour to be confident – supported by consciously relaxing muscles and breathing deeply. In a short time, the feelings will follow the non-verbal behaviour.

You can encourage your client to practise this exercise along a continuum of difficult situations, for example starting with contributing at a less important meeting and moving to more difficult ones. You can suggest that they ask a trusted person to give them feedback when they try the new behaviour.

### **Pitfalls**

Some people are sceptical about the power of positive thinking. It can help to say that positive thoughts need to be believable, not just wishful thinking. Occasionally, negative thoughts are recognized from childhood or other situations. Be prepared to recognize this, but you don't have to go there.

### **Bibliography**

Adapted from: Beck, A. T. (1976) *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders*, New York, NY: International Universities Press.