



Taking Your Thoughts to Court

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Discover how a simple Cognitive Behavioural Therapy exercise can help you build better resilience while breaking free from negative thought patterns

Between imminent work deadlines, personal obligations, and a nationwide rise in the cost of living, it's no surprise that you may be feeling stressed or overwhelmed right now. However, with Stress Awareness Month taking place throughout April, we wanted to give you the power to navigate periods of stress in a positive, solution-focused way.

As a major cause of long-term absence from work, stress can take a huge toll on your mental and physical wellbeing. In fact, during 2021-2022, [36.8 million](#)

working days were lost to work-related stress, anxiety, or depression across the UK.

With such staggering figures highlighting the need for intervention and adequate stress management in the workplace, many of us might assume that business leaders are doing all they can to tackle stress amongst their staff. The reality is that only [50%](#) of UK employees believe their organisation is effective at managing work-related stress.

In order to tackle the stress we experience both in and out of the workplace, it's important that we're able to recognise the various signs of stress. While this will vary from one individual to the next, the general [signs of stress](#) are categorised as:

- Panic attacks or breathing difficulties
- Depression
- Lack of concentration
- Fatigue
- Anger and irritability
- Worry, tension, and anxiety
- Headaches and muscle tension
- Racing, negative, or intrusive thoughts
- A sense of hopelessness
- Social withdrawal
- Insomnia
- Loss of libido
- Stomach issues such as indigestion, constipation, or diarrhoea
- Sweating or shivering
- Feeling sick or dizzy

Once we have identified the symptoms we're experiencing as stress, we can take steps to overcome these periods of overwhelm in a safe and healthy way – such as with the help of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

What is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy?

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a mode of talk-based therapy that can help you manage feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression by reframing your thoughts and changing your behaviours.

CBT works by enabling you to compartmentalise your problems (and the negative thought patterns associated with them) in order to break free from these cycles, improve your state of mind, and build better personal resilience.

While other talk therapies tend to focus on working through issues you may have experienced in the past, CBT deals with how we feel in the moment and how our current state of mind impacts how we think and behave. It is a practical, actionable form of therapy that can be applied on a daily basis to change unhelpful thoughts and behaviours.

How can CBT help me manage stress?

Of the many branches associated with CBT, there's one technique that is particularly effective for managing stress and our response to it. This exercise, known as Taking Your Thoughts to Court, helps you address the types of cognitive distortions that lead to negative thoughts, actions, and impairment from living our best lives. Some examples of [cognitive distortions](#) include:

- *Catastrophic thinking* – believing and expecting the worst will happen in any given situation
- *Discounting the positives* – not acknowledging or enjoying positive moments in life
- *Mental filtering* – viewing yourself or your life through a consistently negative lens
- *Jumping to conclusions* – basing your decisions on what you *think* to be true, rather than what you *know* to be true
- *Personalisation* – blaming yourself for things that are outside of your control

- *Polarised thinking* – experiencing a lack of balance in your thinking: you believe things are either wonderful or terrible, and there's no in between

In order to channel out these cognitive distortions and negative thought patterns, we can calm our minds by implementing the technique of taking our thoughts to court.

But, how do we do it?

The act of taking your thoughts to court uses the underlying principles of CBT (*what do you believe and why do you believe it?*) to challenge negative thinking and mitigate the unhelpful and often destructive behaviours that come with it. This technique encourages you to examine the evidence for and against a negative or stressful thought – enabling you to take a step back from your thinking, break unproductive thought patterns, and ultimately generate a more balanced and considered alternative to those negative thoughts.

Not only will this help you to better communicate your thoughts and feelings by achieving a sense of clarity, but it will also enable you to set healthy boundaries at home and at work to avoid becoming trapped in the same thought cycles in the future.

Let's look at a real-life example of taking your thoughts to court:

Your boss emails you to request a 1-2-1 meeting, providing no further explanation

This triggers negative feelings of fear, uncertainty, stress, and worry

These thoughts cause you to experience cognitive distortions: *What if I lose my job? What if I can't provide for my family? What if my partner leaves me? What if I become homeless?*

At this point, instead of letting our thoughts run away with us, we need to identify the one single thought that is driving this response. This is also known as the *hot thought*

In this situation, the hot thought might be: *I've done something wrong and I'm going to get in trouble*

Now, look at the factual evidence for and against this thought. An example of evidence that supports this thought might be that you've been late to work a few times recently, while evidence against this thought might be that you made your manager aware that you will be late ahead of time, and they told you not to worry

Next, consider the notion that you may not know all the facts. Your manager could be planning on talking to you about something completely unrelated – or even something positive! The truth that you have constructed in your mind is not necessarily the truth of the situation

Remind yourself that you are catastrophising the situation and causing yourself more stress than is necessary. Having this sense of self-awareness is a great way to step back from your negative thinking and assess the situation with a greater level of clarity and calmness

We hope this technique helps you to challenge negative thoughts as soon as they arise, while implementing a healthier, more logical way of rationalising your feelings around a stressful situation. By practising this technique regularly, you should find that you experience cognitive distortions far less frequently and instead develop practical coping skills for whatever life throws at you.

Further support

If your employer offers Vivup's Employee Assistance Programme, there are lots of useful resources around managing stress and anxiety to be explored. Plus, you can also access a 24-hour telephone helpline for responsive, confidential, and totally independent advice should you or a colleague need mental health support.

Sources

[Stress in the Workplace | Factsheets | CIPD](#)

[Stress: its surprising implications for health \(medicalnewstoday.com\)](#)

[Signs and symptoms of stress - Mind](#)

[Overview - Cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\) - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk)

[Kindness Challenge - Mental Health UK \(mentalhealth-uk.org\)](https://mentalhealth-uk.org)

[Cognitive Distortions Explained With 10 Examples | UPMC HealthBeat](#)