

*You mainly feel the way you think.*

—Albert Ellis



## EMPOWERING EDUCATION

Mindfulness-Based Social & Emotional Learning

### Cognitive Triad: Reframing Negative Thoughts

**Level:** Middle School (6-8)

**Timeframe:** 30 minutes

**Concepts:**

- Behaviors
- Emotions
- Thoughts
- Negative/Positive Self-Talk



### Big Ideas For This Lesson

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is well-known as one of the most evidence-based therapeutic approaches and the use of CBT as a preventative teaching strategy to reduce childhood anxiety has been well documented.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> To understand the basics of CBT you need only understand the cognitive triad (see diagram, right). Though it may sound fancy, the premise of the **cognitive triad** is quite simple: changing your **thoughts**, your **emotions**, or your **behaviors** will in turn affect the other two.

For instance, if you want to change a difficult emotion like despair, rather than trying to “will” your way out of despair you can focus your attention on changing a specific behavior. Changing your behavior will in turn affect your thoughts and emotions and thus create a feedback loop that is self-reinforcing. Conversely, a shift in your emotions has clear impacts on your thoughts and behaviors. Changing a thought pattern will result in subsequent changes in emotions and behaviors. If you change one, the others change too - for better or worse.



Developing a basic understanding of CBT empowers students to take ownership over their emotions and provides a roadmap to creating change. The simplest route to changing an emotion is not necessarily direct; it is through small changes in our behaviors and thoughts. The purpose of this lesson is to help students to understand the relationship between thoughts, emotion, and behaviors, identify **negative automatic thoughts** and practice **reframing** them as positive thoughts. The upcoming lessons [Thoughts, Mindfulness, & Letting Go](#) and [Teflon & Velcro](#) will provide alternative strategies for addressing thoughts. We encourage you and your students to experiment with each and decide what is most helpful for you.



## Essential Vocabulary

Behavior  
Cognitive Triad  
Emotion  
Mood  
Negative Automatic Thought  
Reframing  
Thought



## Preparation

1. Familiarize yourself with the Cognitive Triad concept.
2. Prepare NATS cards and make copies of Reframing NATS worksheet for each student.

## Materials

- Cognitive Triad Projection or Handout
- [Negative Thoughts Cards](#)
- [Reframing Negative Automatic Thoughts Worksheet](#)



## Teaching Script

### BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE & CONCEPT MODELING (I DO)

**Teaching Note:** Review the *Building Background Knowledge* section and decide how to best approach the subject with your students. While the **cognitive triad** can provide a helpful visual model, it may or may not be necessary to teach it to your students. For the purposes of this lesson, students should understand the following core concepts prior to guided practice:

- Be able to explain the difference between behaviors, thoughts, and emotions.
- Understand that changing one factor (behavior/thought/emotion) will change the other two (behavior/thought/emotion).
- Understand how to identify and reframe negative thoughts as positive thoughts.

Solicit some universal experiences from students by asking them to raise their hands in response to simple questions like:

- *How many of you have ever had an **emotion** that you just couldn't get rid of?*
- *How many of you have ever been stuck on a **thought** that you just can't seem to stop thinking?*
- *How many of you have ever had a really hard time sticking with a new habit or **behavior**?*

*The cognitive triad is one way that we can help ourselves with all of these things. It's not very easy to change an emotion by just telling ourselves to 'feel happier' or 'stop being sad,' but we actually can change our emotions by first changing our behaviors and our thoughts.*

*Let's take a closer look at the cognitive triad.*

Draw cognitive triad on the board or project the image.

*What are the three parts of the triad that you notice?*

*Great, so we have behaviors, thoughts, and emotions.*

a. *"What is an example of a behavior?"*

Focus on specific, observable behaviors (e.g., going on a walk, crying, exercising, reading, and spending time alone).

b. *"What is an example of an emotion?"*

Encourage students to use their emotional vocabulary - thinking beyond just the basics (e.g., despair, ecstatic, frustration, content, etc.).

- c. *“What is an example of a thought?”*

Thoughts can be easily distinguished as something you tell yourself that you could put in quotes (e.g., “No one likes me,” “Everything will be ok,” “This is the worst day ever,” “It’s no big deal”).

Take some time here to check for understanding and ensure that students clearly understand the differences between behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. They may require further coaching and prompting.

*Notice that the arrows on the triad go both ways. What do you think this means about how our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors affect each other?”*

- “That’s right - if you change one, the others change.”*
- “So if I change my thoughts, what changes?”* Encourage all students to respond as a call and response.
- “And if I change my behaviors, what changes?”* (Repeat call and response)
- “And if I change my emotions, what changes?”* (Repeat call and response)

**Teaching Note:** Get a little bit silly here and use repetition to reinforce the concept of the cognitive triad. Ask the above call and response questions repeatedly until you are sure that all students understand.

*Now that we understand how our thoughts, behaviors, and emotions are all related, we are going to learn how to change our emotions by changing our thoughts. The first step to changing anything is becoming aware of what needs to change, so we need to be able to tell the difference between thoughts that help us and thoughts that hurt us.*

*Did you know that almost everyone struggles with negative thoughts from time to time? Whether we realize it or not, we all have ways of putting ourselves down, telling ourselves we’re not good enough, or thinking that we should be better than we are. These are called **negative automatic thoughts** – or **NATS** for short. They are negative because they lead us to feel unpleasant or unwanted emotions, and they are automatic because they usually happen without us even noticing them. In fact, they’re a lot like the insect gnats! They’re tiny, annoying, and mostly harmless on their own – but when we have too many of them they can be a real problem!*

Discuss examples of NATS.

*For instance, we might have really obvious NATS like, ‘I’m so stupid,’ ‘I’m ugly,’ or ‘No one likes me;’ or we might have less obvious NATS like ‘I should be a better student,’ or ‘Things will never get better,’ or ‘I have to be the best.’ What are some other examples of NATS?*

Solicit student responses.

*While it is normal to have a few NATS now and then, if we have a lot of NATS and don't do anything about them they can cause us to feel sad, overwhelmed, and even depressed. The good news, however, is that we are in control of our thoughts. Once we realize we are having NATS we can change them by **reframing** them as positive thoughts. Reframing is simple:*

- 1) Identify the **Negative Automatic Thought(s)** (writing it down can be helpful).*
- 2) Ask yourself, "How is this thought trying to help me?"*
- 3) Replace the NAT with a positive thought that addresses the same need.*

*For example, if your NAT is "I stink at soccer," you can notice that your thought is trying to help you become a better soccer player. So, a positive thought to replace your NAT could be "I am trying my best at soccer and will keep practicing so I can improve."*

*What are some other examples of reframing a NAT with a positive thought?*

Solicit student examples, ensuring that students understand how to reframe a negative thought.



## GUIDED PRACTICE (WE DO)

Use the attached [Negative Thoughts Cards](#) to facilitate an interactive practice session on reframing negative thoughts. We recommend using an active engagement structure, such as [Quiz-Quiz-Trade](#) or [Mix-Pair-Share](#)<sup>5</sup> to facilitate this practice. Here is a basic outline:

**Teaching note:** If your students are unfamiliar with active engagement structures, practice them first using simple and fun topics (e.g., What is your dream vacation? What superpower would you choose and why? etc.)

- a. Each student receives at least 1 Negative Thought Card.
- b. Students stand and move around the room while you play music.
- c. When the music stops, students partner with the closest person.
- d. Provide a guideline for who shares first (e.g., the person with the longest hair, the person closest to the door, etc.) and provide a time-limit for sharing (1 -2 minutes per turn).
- e. One student reads their negative thought card, and the other student practices reframing that negative thought as a positive thought.
- f. Students switch roles.
- g. Students trade cards when you start the music for another round.
- h. Facilitate as many rounds as time allows.



## REINFORCING LESSON CONCEPTS (YOU DO)

Provide time for students to complete a [Reframing Negative Automatic Thoughts](#) for at least one troubling thought they are experiencing.

*Now that you have had some practice reframing NATS, it's time to try it out with one of your own thoughts. Take a moment to think of a troubling thought you have had that just keeps pestering you. It could be a really big worry or it could just be a small worry. Just choose one thought that is challenging to you right now and use the worksheet to help you reframe it. Remember: this is just for you, so you don't have to share your thought with anyone if you don't want to. You can use this worksheet as often as you would like to help you with negative thoughts.*

As time allows, facilitate a group reflection on the experience of reframing negative automatic thoughts.

**Teaching Note:** The cognitive triad also forms the theoretical basis of the I-statement, so it provides a helpful way to review and reinforce the I-Statement lesson (e.g., "I feel *emotions* when *behaviors* because *thoughts*").



## EVIDENCE OF CONCEPT ATTAINMENT

### *Reflect on it*

- Behaviors, thoughts, and emotions all are connected. What happens to the others if you change one?
- How can you easily identify a thought?
- Did you find reframing NATS to be helpful? Why or why not?
- What other creative ways can you think of to change negative thoughts?
- Why would mindfulness be an important skill for identifying negative thoughts?

### *Journal it*

- Whenever you feel a strong emotion this week, complete a thought record. This will help you identify which thoughts and behaviors are affecting your mood.
- If you notice a Negative Automatic Thought, try reframing it in your journal.



## EXTENSIONS

### *Classroom*

- Following this lesson, provide time each day for students to practice identifying and reframing negative thoughts. This can be done with a partner or in their journal.
- Post a picture of the cognitive triad and/or the reframing negative thoughts worksheet in the take-a-break-space next to the feeling statement.

### *School-wide*

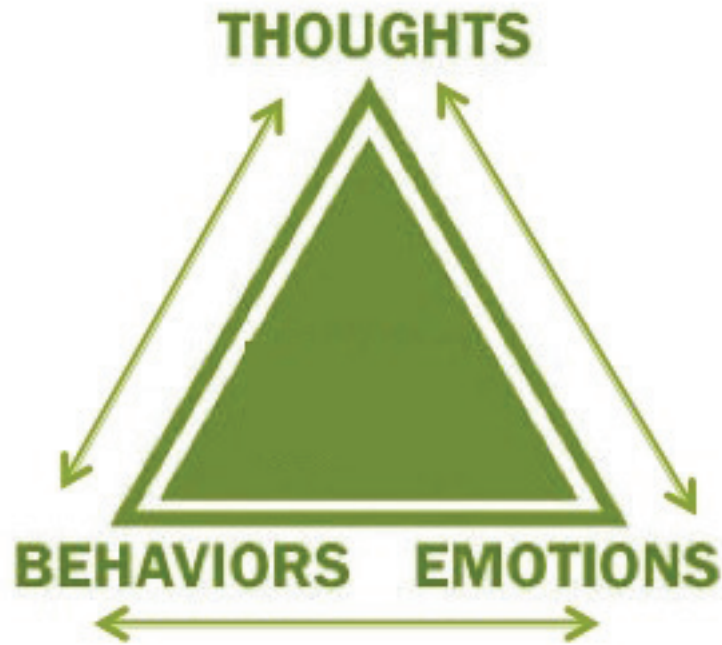
- Display cognitive triads in halls, cafeteria, and public spaces.
- Prompt students to notice and reframe negative thoughts as they arise.
- Use the cognitive triad during Restorative Sessions to help students identify and understand the connection between their behaviors, thoughts, and emotions.





## REFERENCES

1. F sak, BJ, Richard, D, and Mann, A. The prevention of child and adolescent anxiety: a meta-analytic review. *Prev Sci.* 2011; 12: 255–268.
2. Neil, AL and Christensen, H. Efficacy and effectiveness of school-based prevention and early intervention programs for anxiety. *Clin Psychol Rev.* 2009; 29: 208–215.
3. Stallard P., Skryabina E., Taylor G., Phillips R., Daniels H., Anderson R., Simpson N. Classroom-based cognitive behaviour therapy (FRIENDS): A cluster randomised controlled trial to Prevent Anxiety in Children through Education in Schools (PACES) (2014) *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 1 (3), pp. 185-192.
4. Stallard, P. School-based interventions for depression and anxiety in children and adolescents. *Evid Based Ment Health.* 2013; 16: 60–61.
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### REFRAMING NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS (NATS)

What is your Negative Automatic Thought (NAT)?	How is this thought trying to help you?	What is a positive thought you can use instead?
My NAT is...	This NAT is trying to help me...	A poitive thought I can use to meet the same need is...

## NEGATIVE THOUGHT CARDS

<b>I guess I'll just never be cool.</b>	<b>It's not worth trying, I'll just mess it up.</b>	<b>I can't do that. It's too hard.</b>
<b>I quit!</b>	<b>Everyone is always better than me!</b>	<b>There must be something wrong with me.</b>
<b>Why do bad things only happen to me?</b>	<b>I never do anything right.</b>	<b>I'm not good at anything.</b>
<b>I'm terrible at math.</b>	<b>No one likes me. I'll never have friends.</b>	<b>I'm just not smart enough.</b>
<b>Everyone is against me!</b>	<b>I'm a horrible person.</b>	<b>I don't even like myself.</b>