

The background of the cover is white and decorated with several overlapping circles in yellow and light blue. The circles are scattered across the page, with a higher concentration around the title text.

# The Cure for Loneliness

**WORKBOOK**

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# Contents

	Introduction	1
EXERCISE 1	<b>Challenge Cognitive Distortions</b>	3
EXERCISE 2	<b>Introduction to the A-B-C Model</b>	7
EXERCISE 3	<b>Challenge Irrational Beliefs (CBA Micro-Skill 1)</b>	12
EXERCISE 4	<b>Sort Out Automatic Negative Thoughts (CBA Micro-Skill 2)</b>	13
EXERCISE 5	<b>Challenge Distortions Fast (CBA Micro-Skill 3)</b>	14
EXERCISE 6	<b>Keep a Negative Thought Record (CBA Micro-Skill 4)</b>	15
EXERCISE 7	<b>Reduce Unwanted Negative Self-Talk (CBA Micro-Skill 5)</b>	16
EXERCISE 8	<b>Recognize That Negative Thoughts Are Nothing More Than Thoughts (CBA Micro-Skill 6)</b>	17
EXERCISE 9	<b>Reframe Blame (CBA Micro-Skill 7)</b>	18

## Introduction

**T**HANK YOU FOR reading *The Cure for Loneliness*. This workbook will give you additional tools for learning how to unlock any mental traps that might be holding you back. It's intended to provide a sense of freedom and confidence, as well as to help you develop the ability to build and maintain authentic relationships.

The main book introduced concepts such as resiliency and the cognitive-behavioural approach (CBA), an evidence-based way to help people remove mental barriers that are holding them back. CBA concepts can be effectively used to support subclinical challenges such as feeling isolated or lonely. Over the past 30 years I have had some wonderful success with clients using similar activities, and it is so empowering to see people reframe unwanted thoughts, allowing them to develop a new self-confidence.

This workbook is designed to be completed at your own pace. Try an exercise, and stick with it until you're comfortable with the process. Then, move on to another exercise. Mental traps can be sticky, but a persistent approach over time can help you unstick yourself.

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### **Important Note**

If you are experiencing anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts, it's important to understand that this workbook is not meant for clinical therapy. If you feel you are in a mental health crisis, contact 911 or the Canada Suicide Prevention Service 24/7 crisis line at 1-833-456-4566.

## EXERCISE 1

# Challenge Cognitive Distortions

COGNITIVE-BEHAVIOURAL APPROACH (CBA) restructuring can help you obtain insights that can change unhelpful thinking patterns into positive ones. One way to stop unwanted negative thoughts, or distortions,<sup>1</sup> is to learn how to challenge them with intention.

This technique can be particularly helpful for challenging perceived barriers (e.g., excessive work demands). If your internal dialogue is, “I have no control over my work,” then you’re more likely to create a cognitive distortion that results in believing your perceived barrier is immovable. By practicing cognitive restructuring, you can challenge a perceived barrier and consider alternatives.

Cognitive distortions can drive unwanted negative thinking. As you review each of the following, notice how the beliefs can contribute to self-doubt if not challenged.

**Personalizing:** Accepting most of the blame: “I’m alone because of who I am.”

**Mind Reading:** Believing you know what others think: “They’d never like me.”

**Fortune-Telling:** Predicting bad things will happen with no evidence: “I’m going to be alone forever.”

**All-or-Nothing Thinking:** Assessing situations as being black or white: “If they don’t return my call today, they never will.”

**Catastrophizing:** Being concerned that the results of a situation will be bad and you won’t be able to cope: “If they reject me, I’ll be a mess.”

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron T. Beck et al., *Cognitive Therapy of Depression* (New York: Guilford Press, 1979).

**Labelling:** Assigning one word to label yourself or others: “I’m unloveable.”

**Overgeneralizing:** Assuming with a limited amount of experience: “I’m never going to meet someone who cares about me.”

**Negative Filtering/Discounting Positives:** Highlighting the negatives while making positives seem unimportant: “She said ‘Hi’ to me because we were in a meeting. She’s never noticed me outside this meeting, so she likely doesn’t care about me.”

### Check-in

Like faulty assumptions, cognitive distortions can result in cognitive schemas that negatively influence how you view yourself and how you think the world views you. Negative thinking can lead to uncertainty that creates fear, which, if not dealt with, may inhibit your desire to try.

- As you review the above cognitive distortions, are there any you can relate to?
- In your view, what’s the link between a cognitive distortion and your view of yourself?

Cognitive restructuring can help you learn how to change your thinking from negative to positive, which can change your overall mood and general outlook.

The following Seven-Column Thought Record Strategy model is adapted from Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky’s book *Mind over Mood*:<sup>2</sup>

**Action 1:** Get into a calm mental state. A resiliency exercise such as deep breathing or a three-minute meditation can help you find a state of calm. It’s

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<sup>2</sup> Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky, *Mind over Mood: A Cognitive Therapy Treatment Manual for Clients* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995).

important to not try this step when you're feeling intense stress. This technique works best when you can be calm.

**Action 2:** Tune in to a situation that triggers some negative thoughts and feelings. It's not necessary to pick your worst situation, just one you recall clearly.

**Action 3:** What feelings and mood are attached to this situation? Don't mix up thoughts and feelings. Feelings are typically a single word (e.g., frustrated, sad, mad, worried, anxious, scared, fearful). List all the emotions you can think of, and then describe the general mood you experienced after this event (e.g., depressed).

**Action 4:** Identify the automatic thoughts. Write out all the automatic thoughts attached to these feelings and the mood you experienced. Your thoughts could be:

- I'm alone, and no one cares.
- They don't want my opinion.
- I'm not good enough.
- I should have expected this.

Now pick what you believe is the most painful thought.

**Action 5:** Look for objective, supportive evidence. Step back and look for the objective evidence that supports your automatic thoughts. For example:

- I was supposed to meet someone at 5 pm and they didn't show up.

**Action 6:** Find objective, contradictory evidence. The purpose of this step is to challenge your automatic thoughts. Using the above example, some objective, contradictory evidence might be:

- They may have forgotten about the meeting.
- They may have gotten caught up or may be stuck in traffic.

The key point here is that the contradictory statements are less judgemental than the reactive thoughts, which might be, "They didn't show up because they didn't want to see me."

**Action 7:** Identify fair and balanced thoughts. By the time you get to this part of the process, you've been able to review both sides and should have a balanced and fair view of what happened. Write out your balanced thought. Keep in mind that the goal of this model is to challenge automatic thoughts.

- I'll call to check if they are okay and reschedule the meeting.

### **Check-in**

- Notice how the process of cognitive reframing can change your mood from feeling rejected to feeling concerned.
- Take any perceived barriers you have and put them through this process one at a time. The combination of resiliency and starting to adapt CBA techniques can help you reframe your view of the world and self. That can be one key to unlocking your mental trap.
- It's helpful when you do this to anchor your mental state with a positive affirmation (e.g., "I'm a caring person") that can be used in the future to help you get through a challenging thought. Self-compassion can be a pathway to positive affirmation. Self-compassion is the practice of talking to yourself kindly whenever you are experiencing emotional pain. It can be helpful to do this whenever you're being hard on yourself. This practice can also help you have more positive thoughts about others, which can assist in building social connections. Often, all that's between a stranger and a friend are a few non-judgemental conversations where trust can be built.



## EXERCISE 2

# Introduction to the A-B-C Model

ACCORDING TO Albert Ellis, the mental trap becomes an individual's anti-happiness formula.<sup>3</sup> Ellis's A-B-C model can help you avoid the misery of living an unfulfilled life that's often associated with feelings of isolation and loneliness. The best way to unblock this anti-happiness formula, according to Ellis, is to learn how to stop being upset about people, situations, or events.

The main reason for such experiences lies in your thinking, identified as irrational ideas, faulty assumptions, or core beliefs that you've defined as negative beliefs. You are unique, with your weaknesses and faults. This is part of your "human package." You must understand that it's not possible for everyone to love and approve of you. You can learn to think more rationally and replace negative thoughts with positive ones.

The A-B-C model highlights the fact that most negative thinking is directly attributed to previously created faulty beliefs or assumptions that result in faulty cognitive schemas. Irrational rules and faulty beliefs are created from life experiences. Too often they're put there by the people we thought were supposed to protect us (e.g., parents, teachers, employers, co-workers). Also, some faulty beliefs come from traumatic circumstances and experiences. However, most are learned from direct life experiences. Exposure to an embarrassing event or humiliating situation can contribute to belief systems. Most beliefs are a result of logical misinterpretation of the cause-and-effect connections in events or situations. All these beliefs are "absolutistic"; that is, they're taken as law, even though they're shaded and being followed unknowingly.

Often, sticking to faulty beliefs can hold you in the mental trap, which in turn creates the anxiety and fear that can keep you in isolation and loneliness.

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Ellis and Robert Harper, *A Guide to Rational Living* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961).

The following is an overview of the A-B-C steps, a user-friendly way to stop negative thinking:

**Activating event.** Something happens (say, your partner is late again), and you choose your feelings based on what you think. Not being aware of how your thinking influences your feelings can lead to unfavourable consequences for yourself and others.

**Belief.** You react to an activating event with an irrational belief driving your behaviour (“He’s always late, he doesn’t care about me”). You might defend your actions (e.g., anger, irritability, avoidance, withdrawal) as a response to the activating event. That often leads to undesirable consequences, when your thoughts cause you and others emotional pain.

**Consequences.** These can occur when you’re not aware of the link between the activating event and the automatic irrational beliefs that trigger both negative feelings and ineffective behaviours. The model’s purpose is to teach that there’s a way to learn how to control activating events (triggers) from automatically leading to negative feelings and behaviours. Often we move directly from A (activating event) to C (consequences) without noticing the B (irrational belief). The mental trap is often developed outside your level of awareness.

To unlock your mental trap, identify which of the following absolutistic thought patterns may apply to your thinking:

- Things are always clearly this way or that way; there’s no grey area.
- Things are too often wrong. I find small events ruin the entire day for me.
- Things never are good for me, and I find it hard to celebrate the moment.
- I find I jump to conclusions too often, with not enough evidence.
- I can magnify a situation to the point that the original issue has been greatly enlarged.
- I label people, places, and things and find it hard to change those labels.
- I will reverse blame as quickly as I can and blame others for my current situation.

It's helpful when you can accept how these absolutistic thoughts can contribute to your mental trap. By learning the A-B-C model and then practicing the CBA techniques in the next exercises, you can learn how to better take charge of your negative thinking.

The A-B-C model purports that the things you say to yourself, not what's happening to you, are what cause your positive or negative emotions. According to the model, human beings are taught how to think rationally and are prone to developing absolutist rules that lead to internal rules such as *shoulds*, *musts*, and *oughts*. These cognitive commands are mostly responsible for self-defeating behaviours, causing anxiety, depression, shyness, isolation, and loneliness.

Unlocking your mental trap begins with a willingness to challenge negative thinking. Only you have the power to create your disturbing thoughts and feelings, so only you have the power to change them. There's no magic pill, only practice and conviction.

Using the A-B-C model begins with identifying upsetting thoughts as they flow in. How many of these new beliefs can you introduce into your thinking?

- Your thinking, feeling, and behaving continually interact with and influence one another.
- It's you who disturbs yourself cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally.
- You tend to create your own irrational beliefs about events.
- Making yourself emotionally disturbed, you behave in self-defeating ways.
- Once you discover your irrational beliefs, you can learn how to counteract them by using cognitive, emotive, and behavioural methods.
- Your irrational beliefs can be disputed and changed into rational ones.<sup>4</sup>

Achieving well-balanced thinking is a recipe for unlocking the mental trap. It means that you have reached a cognitive balance, knowing how to control unwanted negative thinking. This new philosophy allows you to choose to feel, think, and act in fulfilling and rewarding manners. Your emotional,

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<sup>4</sup> Gerald Corey, *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 5th edition (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1996).

intellectual, or physical needs become more important to you. You start to live life with clarity and health.

This philosophy is the result of the elimination of irrational beliefs affecting your thoughts, physical reactions, feelings, or behaviours. In this stage, your irrational thoughts are replaced by rational ones, accompanied by new sets of feelings, and followed by more rational and realistic behaviours. You come to understand how important thinking is in managing your life's affairs. Newly acquired positive thinking patterns can help solve some of your emotional and behavioural problems. However, you must make sure that your pattern of thinking is solidly founded on rational premises, to avoid a trap of falling again into the old rules and beliefs. To protect yourself from this, you need to practice your new learning.

Learning the A-B-C model is not complicated, once you get the concept. It just requires applying it to help you manage unwanted thoughts. Challenging negative thoughts is aligned with the other CBA concepts presented on cognitive schemas and cognitive distortions. The key is committing to learn and practice how to unlock the mental trap, positioning you to unlock it. The goal of all the preparation work is to put you in the best position to unlock your mental trap so that you can begin your journey to close social connections gaps. The mind can play tricks concerning what is and is not real. Being self-aware, building resiliency, and being able to challenge unwanted negative thoughts positions you to flourish.

Now let's explore the A-B-C model in a case study. John has fallen prey to his less-effective thought pattern. Rejected by his mother and his wife, John developed a fear of women. He has started to mercilessly think irrationally, creating many self-defeating beliefs. John feels lonely, and these feelings have led to additional irrational thinking that reinforces why he's alone. These self-destructive thoughts have only strengthened his mental trap.

John looks back at how his life has been a struggle for him. One **activating event** for John was being rejected by his mother and his ex-wife. The **consequence** of this rejection was further reinforced by his divorce that resulted in withdrawal, fear, and loneliness. John created and followed his own **irrational belief**: "I'm useless."

To challenge this irrational belief, John must examine if he wants to feel better. Though it can sound impossible, with practice there's ample CBA research

demonstrating that if you have conviction, like wanting to learn to ride a bike, you can be taught how to overcome self-defeating thoughts.

For John to be successful at self-disputing, he must answer the following:

- Why do I believe I'm useless?
- Why do I continue to be so hard on myself?
- Where does it say I must have confirmation and approval from all women?

By asking these questions, John can be an observer and recognize that his thoughts are nothing more than opinion. They're not based on any natural law or evidence that they're true. As John discovers that many of these thoughts originate from his self-defeating beliefs, he has an opportunity to change them.

Once John understands and believes that by self-disputing his negative thoughts he can learn new and healthy internal dialogue, he can experience a positive effect:

- I'm not a loser.
- I can be loveable.
- I have decided to give myself another chance to prove who I am.

For John to build a lasting authentic connection with another person, he must learn to free his mind of untruths created by faulty thinking. Keep in mind that building social connections that become authentic connections is only a part of the process. Maintaining authentic connections requires effort and intention to navigate each person's wants and expectations.

## EXERCISE 3

# Challenge Irrational Beliefs (CBA Micro-Skill 1)

THE FOLLOWING activity will help you step back and focus on irrational beliefs in a way in which you can challenge them. Keep in mind that the activating event is just a stimulus. Using this form, challenge the irrational belief. Notice how irrational beliefs are often grounded in faulty logic (*should, must, ought*). Remember that you can't control others, nor can you assume others' actions are because of you.

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**Irrational belief leading to negative consequence**

(e.g., I must be approved of and accepted by all my peers.)

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**Dispute for irrational belief**

(e.g., Why must I be approved of and accepted by all my peers? Where does it say I must be accepted by all? Yes, try, but it may not be possible.)

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**Reframing: Create new effective rational belief**

(e.g., I'm trying to be professional. I suspect most of my peers will like me, but it's okay if all don't. I will keep being professional. I can't make people like me.)

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## EXERCISE 4

# Sort Out Automatic Negative Thoughts (CBA Micro-Skill 2)

THIS TECHNIQUE is useful in identifying your beliefs about others or the world. It will help you identify your automatic negative thoughts, especially thoughts about yourself in the present or a specific situation. Once you've identified your thoughts in the context of a situation, continue asking yourself questions, looking for their origins. Asking rapidly will help reveal core beliefs about yourself. This is an important step in getting to know your core beliefs.

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**Describe your situation**

(e.g., My boss didn't return my call.)

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**Identify your automatic negative thought**

(e.g., I'm a loser.)

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**Challenge the automatic negative thought**

(e.g., Just because someone doesn't return my call doesn't mean I'm a loser.)

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**Reframe a new conclusion**

(e.g., I'm being too hard on myself. Stop guessing and wait until we talk in person next week.)

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## EXERCISE 5

# Challenge Distortions Fast (CBA Micro-Skill 3)

AS YOU'VE LEARNED, most automatic negative thoughts are false. The goal of this technique is to identify distortion (i.e., twisting or altering something out of its true form) and challenge it quickly to get a rational response that's more empowering. This technique can help you monitor your thoughts' distortions and produce more rational responses. Unlocking your mental trap requires replacing irrational thoughts with rational ones.

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<b>Your Negative Thought</b>	<b>Logical Errors</b>	<b>Create an Alternative</b>
<b>Determine how exaggerated it is</b> (e.g., I'm not worthy of love.)	<b>Identify the distortion</b> (e.g., If I were unworthy of love, my children would not tell me they love me.)	<b>Substitute with a rational thought</b> (e.g., I'm feeling lonely today, and that's okay. I'll meet someone in due course.)

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## EXERCISE 6

# Keep a Negative Thought Record (CBA Micro-Skill 4)

KEEPING RECORDS of your negative thoughts can help you develop evidence that you're learning how to better control unwanted negative thinking that can help you unlock your mental trap. Each time you're successful in changing a negative thought, you've filed more evidence that you don't need to be a victim of your automatic negative thoughts. This takes effort and practice, but it's a good opportunity to learn how to develop more rational thinking.

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### Negative Thought Record

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Briefly describe the situation.

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In one word, describe the most present feeling and then rate its intensity from 1 (low) to 10 (high).

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Report the automatic negative thought that's going through your mind.

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Provide evidence that supports the automatic negative thought.

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Provide evidence that contradicts the automatic negative thought.

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Describe the new balanced thought that's grounded in facts, not emotions.

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Name your new feeling in one word. Rate this new feeling's intensity from 1 (low) to 10 (high).

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## EXERCISE 7

# Reduce Unwanted Negative Self-Talk (CBA Micro-Skill 5)

THIS TECHNIQUE can challenge unwanted negative self-talk that, if not dealt with quickly, can make you feel desperate. If you're self-critical, learn how to talk to yourself with the same compassion you'd use with a friend having a similar problem. This technique will help you separate yourself from excessive self-critical thinking by creating a positive distraction. Remember that wherever your behaviour goes, your thinking and feelings have no choice but to follow.

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**Situation**

(e.g., John at home alone.)

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**Automatic Negative Thought**

(e.g., I'm going to always be alone.)

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**Positive Distraction**

(e.g., I can go for a bike ride and call my brother. I always feel good after chatting with him.)

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## EXERCISE 8

# Recognize That Negative Thoughts Are Nothing More Than Thoughts (CBA Micro-Skill 6)

TOO OFTEN when a mental trap has taken a strong hold, any negative thought you're experiencing can feel like it's true, but it's nothing more than a random thought. To check its validity, think of the following table as a negative thought myth-busting experiment that will test your automatic thought. Engaging in a negative thought myth-busting experiment can help you create real evidence that there's nothing wrong with you. This can help you learn to allow negative thoughts to leave as fast as they come. In time and with practice, they'll be just like a dark cloud that rolls in but is gone in a few minutes and is replaced by the sun.

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### Negative Thought Myth-Busting Experiment

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Identify the unwanted negative thought.

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If a friend had the same thought as you just had, what would be the first thought to come to your mind?

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What kind of questions would you ask your friend to help them challenge this unwanted thought?

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What kind of rational advice would you give to your friend?

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Take this advice and apply it to your current situation.

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Did your myth-busting experiment work?

If yes, take the learning.

If no, repeat the experiment.

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## EXERCISE 9

# Reframe Blame (CBA Micro-Skill 7)

IF YOU tend to personalize your irrational thinking, automatically blaming yourself for everything (always assuming you're "bad"), all this does is strengthen your mental trap. Think about the many factors that may be contributing to this thinking. When you find the real cause of your problem, you can probably deal with it more effectively.

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**Look at cause-and-effect connections between your thinking and acting**  
(e.g., I'm no good, so I should just stay home.)

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**Examine other factors contributing to your thoughts and actions**  
(e.g., Being lonely is hard but it doesn't mean I'm no good, just that I'm feeling lonely.)

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**Focus on solving the problem instead of using up energy by blaming yourself and feeling guilty**  
(e.g., I know that just getting out for a bit, even getting a coffee and saying hello to a few people in the store, helps me feel better. I need to focus on planning to build social connections. I won't sit here and attack myself.)

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## **Check-in**

- Now that you have reviewed the CBA micro-skills, which two do you like the most?
- Begin applying the two micro-skills of your choice today to practice challenging unwanted negative thoughts.
- Initially, it can be helpful to work through the exercises on paper or on-screen instead of trying to challenge your thought alone in your head. Write out your CBA processes. Keeping a designated journal or file on your computer or phone can be a comforting way of working through unwanted thoughts or irrational beliefs.