

# Changing Unhelpful Thoughts

## Student Workbook

*Updated August 2019*



**Mississippi State University Student Counseling Services**

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*This workshop and its materials were adapted from  
Cal Poly Counseling Services' Anxiety Toolbox and Getting Unstuck programs.*

# Welcome!

Welcome to **Wellness U**! Wellness U is a collection of workshops with the ultimate goal of providing you with knowledge and skills to increase your overall well-being and meet your goals. The Wellness U Workshop Series has several parts:

- **Stress and Anxiety 101** helps participants understand the effects of stress and anxiety by learning about the fight, flight, or freeze response and the differences between motivational and unhelpful stress/anxiety. Participants will also learn a basic skill for anxiety management: grounding techniques.
- **Changing Unhelpful Thoughts** introduces participants to a cognitive behavioral strategy for challenging unhelpful thoughts. Participants will be able to identify unhelpful thinking styles, learn alternative responses to unhelpful thinking, and become more aware of their ability to challenge and change thinking patterns.
- **Intro to Wellness** introduces participants to concepts of dimensional wellness and how to increase their overall wellness.
- **Intro to Mindfulness** is all about mindfulness, its benefits, and how to practice mindfulness in day-to-day life.
- **The ABZzzzs of Sleep** helps participants improve the quantity and quality of their sleep by learning about sleep hygiene.
- **Relationships 101** introduces participants to healthy versus unhealthy relationships, ways to manage conflict, and how to set boundaries.
- **Test Anxiety** helps participants understand the components of test anxiety and introduces them to a skill to minimize the symptoms of anxiety.
- **Intro to Tai Chi** presents participants with the opportunity to learn about a traditional Chinese form of exercise which emphasizes breath and body movement and can be useful in reducing stress and anxiety as well as improving joint flexibility, stability, and muscular strength.

By the end of this series, you will have received a lot of information and, at times, it may feel overwhelming. Remember that like any skill (e.g., learning to ride a bike), the skills you will learn in **Wellness U** take time and practice to master. At times, you may encounter obstacles and/or find it difficult to integrate these skills into your daily life. That is okay, it is a normal part of the change process. As with all change, it is important to practice as much as you can, even after encountering setbacks.

Think of your practice of these skills as a form of “mental health hygiene.” At the outset, it may seem tedious and you may question why you need to practice these skills so often. Similar to brushing your teeth, daily practice prevents a buildup of stress over time. The more you practice and use these skills as part of your daily routine, the less tedious they may seem because they simply become a regular part of daily life.

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

### Why have I been referred to Wellness U?

Our clinicians recommend participation in Wellness U after meeting with you because they think you can benefit from it. We strongly believe that if you fully engage in Wellness U and practice these skills, you will see the benefit of attending. And we have the research to back this up – since 2016, students have consistently rated these workshops as helpful. Wellness U also helps support your innate resilience by recognizing your autonomy; in other words, we know that students have the ability to address many of their concerns independently in a supportive environment. In fact, some students may get what they need from Wellness U alone. Others may benefit from Wellness U as well as other services, such as Let’s Talk (informal consultation), a support group, group therapy, or individual therapy.

### What if I don’t feel comfortable in groups?

Many people feel anxious about participating in a group. Wellness U is structured and curriculum-driven, like an academic class. You are not required to speak to the entire group if you do not feel comfortable doing so. The facilitators respect each participant’s right to share only what they are comfortable sharing and never require you to share sensitive information about yourself.

### What if I have an urgent need to see a clinician during Wellness U?

Simply let the facilitator or Student Counseling Services’ front desk staff know and they will facilitate you getting the help you need.

### Why do you recommend practice outside of the workshop?

The focus of these workshops is on building skills; in order to achieve that goal, regular practice is essential. The more you practice, the more you may find you get out of these workshops. The assignments are for you and only you, in the service of your own personal growth. You will not be required to provide your responses at any time during this workshop; however, there will be opportunities to ask questions or share if you do feel comfortable.

# Feelings, Physical Sensations, Thoughts, and Actions Worksheet

**Situation** (*When? Where? What? With whom? What did you feel anxious about?*)

You are in class, and the instructor announces an exam for next week.

**Physical Sensations** (*When anxious, what physical sensations did you experience? What did you notice in your body?*)

Hot

Tightness in chest

Heart racing, shallow breathing / sinking feeling in pit of stomach

**Feelings** (*What emotions came up for you when you felt anxious?*)

Agitated and anxious

Scared

Overwhelmed/despairing

**Thoughts** (*What went through your mind when you felt anxious? What did that say or mean about you or the situation?*)

I'm going to fail the test.

If I fail the test, I'll probably fail the course.

And if I fail the course, I'll probably never finish my degree and not get the job I want/have to get and I won't have a future.

**Actions** (*What was your first instinct and/or automatic response? What did you do and/or avoid doing at the time?*)

I tried to study.

But I couldn't focus, so I decided to try to get a good night's rest and try again tomorrow.

However, my mind kept racing and I was tossing and turning all night.

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**Situation** *(When? Where? What? With whom? What did you feel anxious about?)*

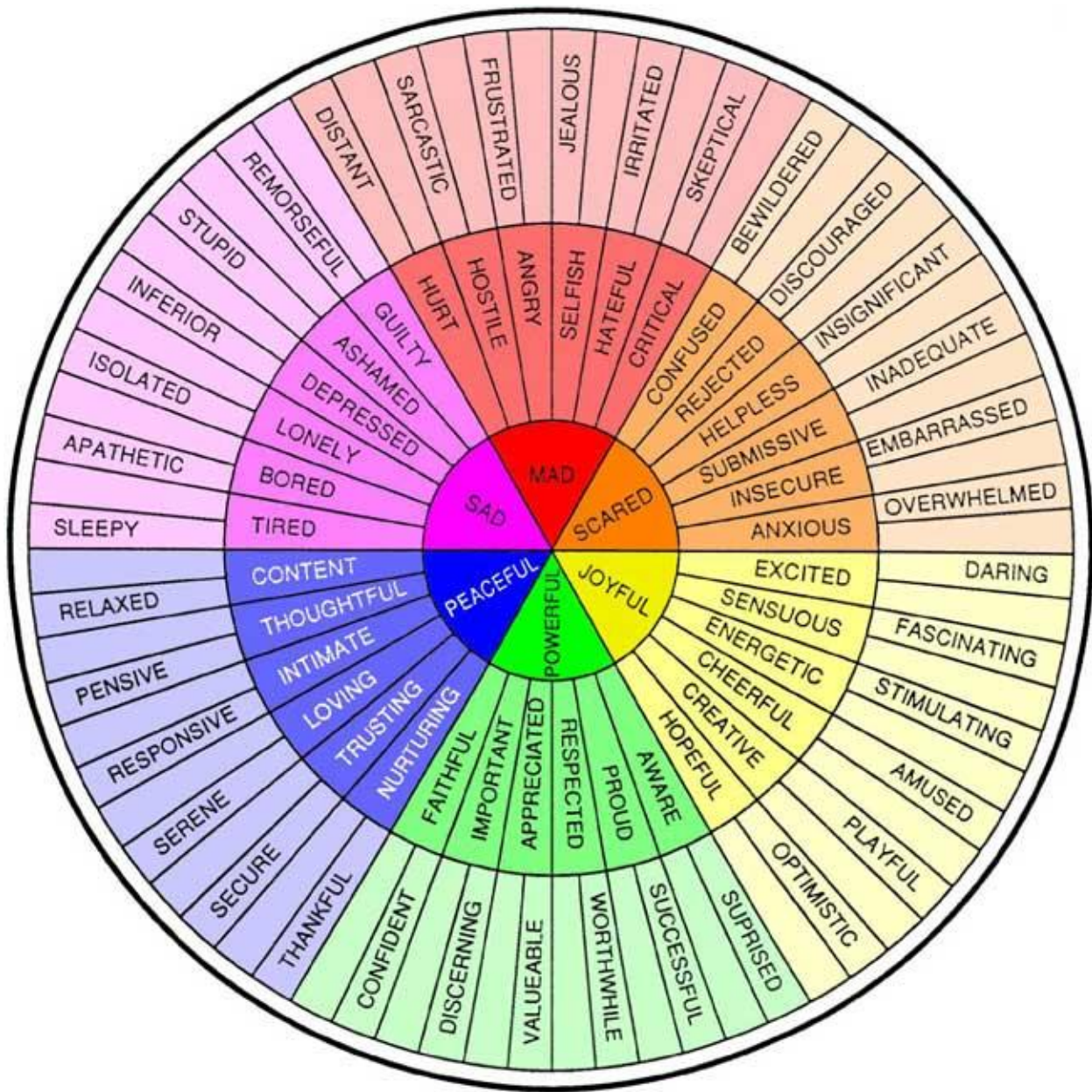
**Physical Sensations** *(When anxious, what physical sensations did you experience? What did you notice in your body?)*

**Feelings** *(What emotions came up for you when you felt anxious?)*

**Thoughts** *(What went through your mind when you felt anxious? What did that say or mean about you or the situation?)*

**Actions** *(What was your first instinct and/or automatic response? What did you do and/or avoid doing at the time?)*

# Feelings Wheel



# Unhelpful Thinking Styles

## All or nothing thinking

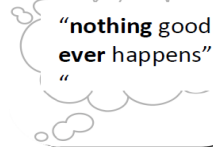


Sometimes called 'black and white thinking'

*If I'm not perfect I have failed*

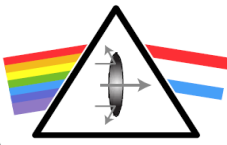
*Either I do it right or not at all*

## Over-generalizing



Seeing a pattern based upon a single event, or being overly broad in the conclusions we draw

## Mental filter



Only paying attention to certain types of evidence.

*Noticing our failures but not seeing our successes*

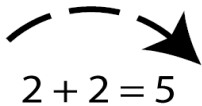
## Disqualifying the positive



Discounting the good things that have happened or that you have done for some reason or another

*That doesn't count*

## Jumping to conclusions



There are two key types of jumping to conclusions:

- **Mind reading** (imagining we know what others are thinking)
- **Fortune telling** (predicting the future)

## Magnification (catastrophizing) & minimization



Blowing things out of proportion (catastrophizing), or inappropriately shrinking something to make it seem less important

## Emotional reasoning



Assuming that because we feel a certain way what we think must be true.

*I feel embarrassed so I must be an idiot*

## should must

Using critical words like 'should', 'must', or 'ought' can make us feel guilty, or like we have already failed

If we apply 'shoulds' to other people the result is often frustration

## Labeling



Assigning labels to ourselves or other people

*I'm a loser  
I'm completely useless  
They're such an idiot*

## Personalization

**"this is my fault"**

Blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn't completely your fault. Conversely, blaming other people for something that was your fault.

**Reminder: Stop, pay attention and get perspective.** This means, stop, pay attention to what is going on in your mind and body and then be intentional about what happens next.

## Challenging Unhelpful Thought Patterns

What is the original thought you want to challenge?

*I'm going to fail the test. If I fail the test, I'll probably fail the course. And if I fail the course, I'll probably never finish my degree and not get the job I want/have to get and I won't have a future.*

---

What makes me think that thought is true?

*If I don't get more prepared for this test, I probably will not do well on it.*

---

What makes me think that thought is not true or not completely true?

*It is not certain that I will fail the test – I do have a little more time to get more prepared. The rest of my thoughts might be unhelpful thinking styles of fortune-telling and catastrophizing.*

---

What's another way to look at this?

*This is a learning experience. Next time, I will start preparing earlier.*

---

What's the worst that could happen? What could I do then?

*The worst that could happen is that I do fail the test. If that happens, I can go to the learning center and go to the Supplemental Instruction, make a study plan for the next test, and form a study group with my peers.*

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What's the best that could happen?

*The best that could happen is that I do not fail the test.*

---

What will probably happen?

*I probably will feel anxious about cramming for the test at the last minute, and I may not do as well as I had hoped, or at least not well in a relaxed and confident way.*

---

What could happen if I changed my thinking?

*If I changed my thinking, I could focus on doing what I can now to study.*

---

What would I tell my friend [think of a specific person] if this happened to them?

*I would tell them "you have this – buckle down and study. Do the best you can. This is a marathon, not a sprint."*

---

What is my alternative thought?

*I'm not as prepared as I want to be for this upcoming test, but I can change that by focusing on studying now and doing the best I can.*

---

What should I do now?

*Take a few deep breaths, take a 5 minute walk, and get to studying. If these catastrophic thoughts come back, I'll take another break, review this sheet, and get back to studying.*

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