Catching automatic thoughts

How to notice the thoughts that go with a change in mood.

Automatic thoughts are the quick, running commentary your mind produces all day. Most of the time you do not notice them. You only notice the feeling they leave behind.

What they are like

- **Fast.** They arrive in a flash, often as a few words or a picture.
- **Believable.** They feel true, even when they are only opinions.
- **Biased.** When you are anxious, they lean towards danger. When you are low, they lean towards loss and failure.
- **Habitual.** The same themes come round again and again.

How to catch one

1. **Use your feelings as a signal.** A sudden drop in mood, a spike of anxiety or a flash of anger means a thought has just gone by.
2. **Ask the question.** "What was going through my mind just then?"
3. **Look for pictures as well as words.** Sometimes the thought is an image of something going wrong.
4. **Write it down as it came.** Not tidied up. "I am going to make a fool of myself" is more useful than "I felt nervous about the meeting."
5. **Turn questions into statements.** "What if I fail?" usually hides "I am going to fail."

If you cannot find the thought

- What did this situation mean to me? What does it say about me?
- What was I afraid might happen?
- What would be the worst thing about it?

> **Note**
> At this stage you are only catching the thought, not changing it. Once it is written down we can work on it.

My notes and questions

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Thought record (simple)

Use this when you notice a sudden shift in how you feel.

Name _____ Date _____

Catch the moment as close to when it happens as you can. One line is enough. Rate how strong the feeling was from 0 (not at all) to 10 (the strongest it could be).

When and where	What I felt (0 to 10)	What went through my mind
Tuesday, on the bus to work	*Anxious 7*	*"I am going to mess up the presentation and everyone will see."*

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