

Improving Self-Esteem

Module 4

Biased Expectations

Introduction	2
What are Biased Expectations?	2
Challenging Biased Expectations	4
Thought Diary for Biased Expectations (example)	6
Worksheet: Thought Diary for Biased Expectations	7
Experimenting with Biased Expectations	8
Worksheet: Experiment Record for Biased Expectations	11
Module Summary	7
About This Module	8

Introduction

In Module 3, we talked about how dormant low self-esteem becomes active and maintains itself until it becomes acute. When you encounter an at-risk situation, your negative core belief about yourself is activated and leads to two types of negative thoughts – *biased expectations* and *negative self-evaluations*. In this module, we will examine biased expectations in more detail, and discuss ways of changing and overcoming them. By addressing your biased expectations in daily situations, you can prevent the negative beliefs you hold about yourself from being confirmed and re-activated. Ultimately, this will help you to chip away at your low self-esteem.

What Are Biased Expectations?

Biased expectations are negative thoughts that commonly occur when you encounter an ‘At-Risk Situation’ where it looks likely that your unhelpful rule or assumption will be broken and your negative core beliefs have been activated. When this happens, you will tend to make predictions about how things will turn out and these predictions often tend to be negative. You will tend to:

- Overestimate the likelihood that bad things will happen
- Exaggerate how bad things will be
- Underestimate your ability to deal with things if they don’t go well, and
- Ignore other factors in the situation, which suggest that things will not be as bad as you are predicting.

When you jump to such negative conclusions about the future, you will tend to behave in particular ways – often engaging in unhelpful behaviours. You will tend to:

- **Avoid** the situation totally,
- Try the situation out but **escape** when things seem too difficult or the anxiety seems overwhelming,
- Be overly cautious and engage in **safety behaviours**. These are behaviours that you use to help you get through the situation. For example, you might take someone with you, over-prepare so that you can better face the situation, take medication to help you through, or place certain conditions on entering the situation (eg., turn up late/leave early).

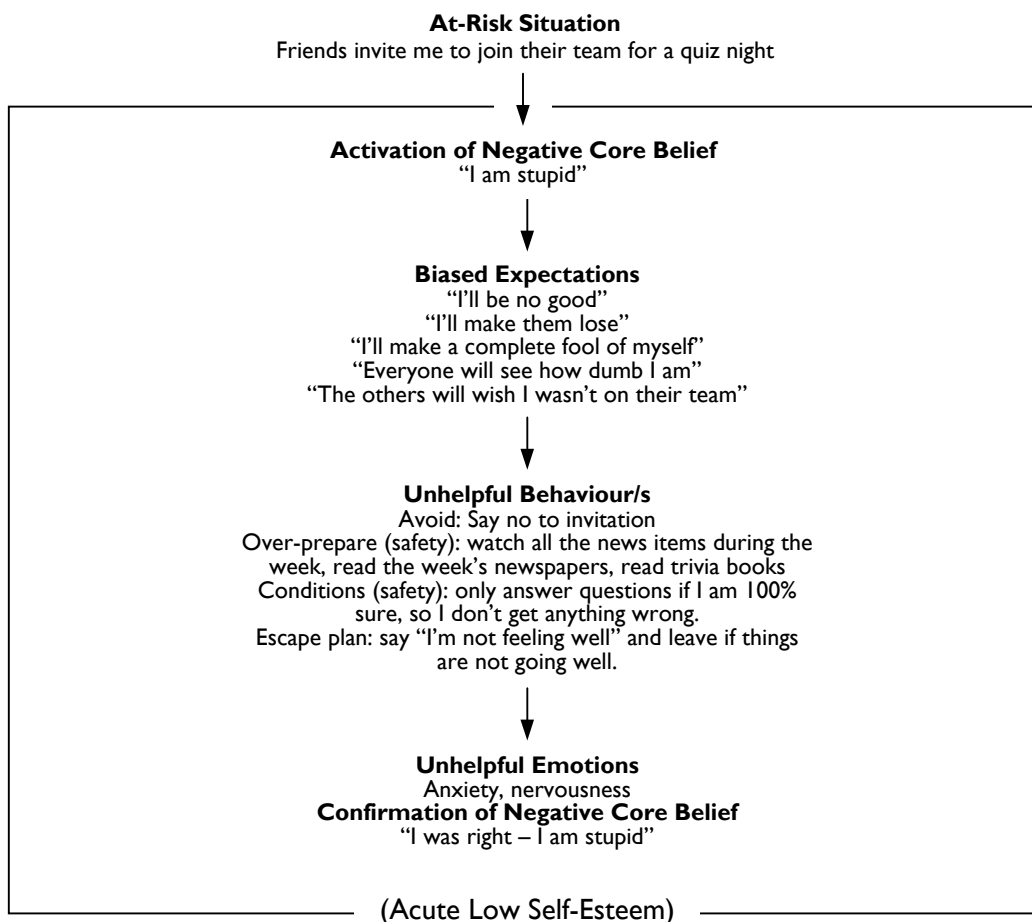
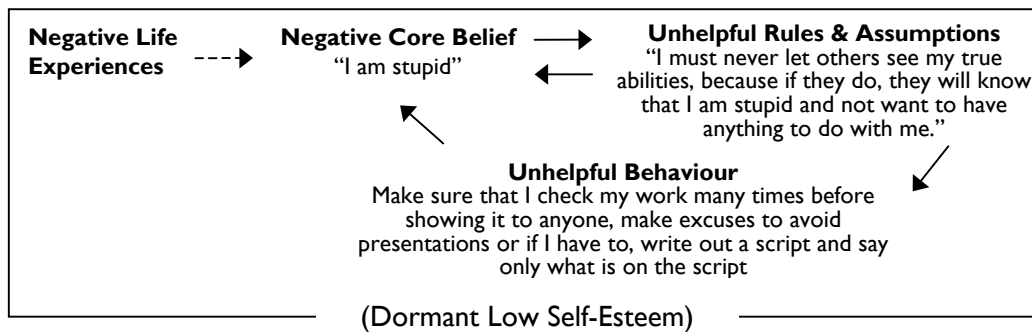


At the end of the day, the unhelpful thoughts and behaviours contribute to you feeling incredibly anxious, nervous, uncertain, and unconfident about things – and this is confirmation that your negative core beliefs are true.

Here’s an example of biased expectations in action. You can follow this example that is illustrated in the form of the model on the next page. Let’s say that you have the negative core belief, “I am stupid.” At present, your low self-esteem is dormant as you have developed the rule and assumption, “I must never let others see my true abilities, because if they do, they will know that I am stupid and not want to have anything to do with me.” As long as you are able to live up to your rule, you might feel okay about yourself. However, the situation is about to change. A few of your friends invite you to join their team for a quiz night. You are now in an at-risk situation because you will have to show others your abilities at the quiz night. This means that your rule is likely to be broken.

At this point, you might have thought, “I’ll be no good,” “I’ll let everyone down,” or “Everyone will know how dumb I am,” and are probably feeling anxious. It’s also at this point that you could choose how to approach this situation. You could avoid the situation totally by declining your friends’ invitation or you decide that you will accept the invitation. If you accept the invitation, you might then think about how you could make sure that people do not come to the conclusion that you are stupid. As such, you might prepare very hard for the quiz night by reading all of the week’s newspapers, watching current affairs

programmes and documentaries on TV, and reading trivia books. You might also think about how you could leave the quiz night half way through if things are not turning out well. As discussed above, all these are unhelpful behaviours, and they maintain your negative emotions and confirm your negative core belief.



Continuing with the above example, your belief "I am stupid" gets confirmed in a number of ways. Firstly, it is confirmed by all the negative predictions you are making – all that 'negative self-talk.' Secondly, because you feel so anxious, you might use this as a sign that you are all the negative things you believe about yourself – "If I feel so anxious about this, I must be stupid." Thirdly, all your unhelpful behaviours mean that you are acting in a manner consistent with the idea that you are "stupid." So, if you act as if you are "stupid," you will continue to think and believe that you are "stupid." Finally, if things don't go the way you would like them to (eg, you get some of the questions wrong), you leave early. Because you do so, you don't give yourself a chance to answer a question correctly, or realise that getting a question wrong isn't such a bad thing, or just have fun regardless of the outcome. Alternatively, if things go okay and you

answer a few questions correctly, you might ignore your efforts as “no big deal.” If things go really well and you answer heaps of questions, you might attribute it to all your preparation or say, “The questions were really easy,” but not acknowledge your own abilities.

What we have seen is an unhelpful way of responding to a daily situation, which helps keep your low self-esteem alive and well. So how could you respond differently, in a way inconsistent with low self-esteem? How could you have realistic expectations and engage in helpful behaviour?

Challenging Biased Expectations

One way to address biased expectations is to challenge them ‘head on.’ In cognitive behavioural therapy, this is also called ‘disputation.’ Remember that our thoughts and expectations are often *opinions* we have picked up or learned, rather than facts. Therefore, they can be questioned, and should not be something we just blindly accept if they are causing us distress.



To challenge or dispute your biased expectations means that you dissect them, evaluate how accurate or likely they are, examine what evidence you base your expectations on, and look at any positive things you may be ignoring. In this way, you are like a detective or lawyer, trying to get to the facts of how realistic your expectations are, and putting things in perspective.

Challenging your biased expectations isn’t something you should do in your head as this can get messy and confusing. The best way is to write it down. To help you through the process, we suggest using a Thought Diary for Biased Expectations. This helps you work through the challenging process step by step, on paper, making things clearer and more helpful for you.

On the next page is an example of how to complete a Thought Diary for Biased Expectations, and following that is a blank Thought Diary for you to practise on. The Thought Diaries guide you through how to get your biased expectations out on paper.

The Thought Diary will first ask you to **Identify Your Biased Expectations**. To help you do that, first ask yourself:

- What is the situation I am in?

Then:

- What am I expecting?
- What am I predicting?
- What do I see happening in this situation?
- What conclusions am I making?

After you have written these down, you’ll then need to ask yourself:

- How strongly do I believe this will happen? Rate the strength of your belief between 0 and 100%
- What emotion(s) am I feeling?
- How intense are these emotions? Rate the intensity of your emotion(s) between 0 and 100%

Once you have completed the first section, you are ready to begin to **Challenge Your Biased Expectations**. Here are the questions asked in your Thought Diary to challenge these types of negative thoughts:

- What is the evidence *for* my expectations?
- What is the evidence *against* my expectations?
- How likely is it that what I am expecting will actually happen (Rate 0-100%)?

- What is the worst that could happen?
- What is the best that could happen?
- What is the most likely thing that will happen?
- How does it affect me when I expect the worst?
- If the worst did happen, what could I do to cope?
- How else could I view the situation?
- Are there any positives in me or the situation that I am ignoring?

The ultimate aim of doing this Thought Diary is for you to **Develop** more **Realistic Expectations**. Once you have explored the answers to the above 'challenging' questions in your Thought Diary, ask yourself:

- What would be a more realistic expectation?

The final step is then to:

- Re-rate how much I now believe the original biased expectation I was making,
- Re-rate the intensity of the emotions that I was originally feeling.

If you work through the entire Thought Diary for challenging your biased expectations, it is likely that you will experience a decrease in your belief in the negative predictions you were making and a decrease in the intensity of your emotions. Using a Thought Diary to develop realistic expectations will help quieten, rather than activate or confirm, your negative beliefs about yourself. This will help you approach situations with an open mind, try new things, and often be pleasantly surprised by what you find, instead of letting your negative opinion of yourself constantly interfere with how you live your life.

Try using a Thought Diary for Biased Expectations the next time you notice when you start feeling anxious, nervous and uncertain, or doubt yourself and your abilities. Stop yourself when you notice these sorts of feelings, and see if you can find any biased expectations that are contributing to the feeling. See if you notice any predictions you are making, negative conclusions you are jumping to, or bad outcomes you are envisaging. If you notice these biased expectations rearing their ugly head, use a Thought Diary to tackle them. Continue to use a Thought Diary to deal with these sorts of thoughts and feelings, until it becomes second nature. Then, you will find that you can easily catch the biased expectations in your head and challenge them in your head. This will take some time and a lot of practice, so for now, stick to writing it all down in your Thought Diary.

Thought Diary for Biased Expectations

(example)

Identify Your Biased Expectations

What is the at-risk situation? <i>Friends invite me to be on their quiz team</i>	How much do I believe it will happen (0-100%)? <p style="text-align: center;">80%</p>
What am I expecting? What am I predicting? What do I see happening in this situation? What conclusions am I jumping to? <i>I'll be no good; I'll make them lose; I'll make a complete fool of myself; Everyone will see how dumb I am; The others will wish I wasn't on their team.</i>	What emotion(s) am I feeling? (Rate the intensity 0-100%) <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Anxious (70%)</i></p>

Challenge Your Biased Expectations

What is the evidence <u>for</u> my expectations? <i>There are times I don't know the answers to other people's questions There are times I am not up to speed with current affairs</i>	What is the evidence <u>against</u> my expectations? <i>I have been able to answer some questions at quiz nights before. I have had experiences where I have known things that other people haven't.</i>
How likely is it that what I am expecting will actually happen (0-100%)? 30%	
What is the worst that could happen? <i>I won't answer a single question correctly, we will lose, and my team mates won't talk to me for the rest of the night</i>	What is the best that could happen? <i>I will know the answers to most questions, and because of me our team will win</i>
What is the most likely thing that will happen? <i>I will be able to answer some questions, and our team will do OK</i>	How does it affect me when I expect the worst? <i>Expecting it will be a disaster just makes me feel anxious and likely not go to something that is supposed to be fun</i>
If the worst did happen, what could I do to cope? <i>If I couldn't answer anything, I could make a joke of it to the others. They probably wouldn't notice or care that much - they are my friends after all. I'd feel a bit bad, but I probably wouldn't remember it in a couple of weeks' time.</i>	
How else could I view the situation? <i>It's just a quiz night. It's supposed to be for fun. They probably invited people for their company and to have fun, rather than their intellectual abilities. They probably don't take it that seriously. Quiz nights are suppose to be tricky - they may ask questions that are in areas I know little about. That doesn't mean that I am dumb or know nothing.</i>	
Are there any positives in me or the situation I am ignoring? <i>It's a team effort. If we lose, it isn't just one person's fault. I am good at music and science questions, so it is likely I might know some of the answers to those types of questions.</i>	

Develop Realistic Expectations

What's a more realistic expectation? <i>I don't have to be really good - it's just a quiz night. They are my friends, they are just there to have fun and don't really care about winning or who answers what. It is likely that I will be able to answer some questions that are in my area of interest. How I do at a quiz night isn't a reflection of who I am as a person - everyone has their strengths and weaknesses.</i>	
How much do I believe my original biased expectation now (0-100%)	How intense are my emotions now (0-100%)
30%	20%

Thought Diary for Biased Expectations

Identify Your Biased Expectations

What is the at-risk situation?	How much do I believe it will happen (0-100%)?
What am I expecting? What am I predicting? What do I see happening in this situation? What conclusions am I jumping to?	What emotion(s) am I feeling? (Rate the intensity 0-100%)

Challenge Your Biased Expectations

What is the evidence <u>for</u> my expectations?	What is the evidence <u>against</u> my expectations?
How likely is it that what I am expecting will actually happen (0-100%)?	
What is the worst that could happen?	What is the best that could happen?
What is the most likely thing that will happen?	How does it affect me if I expect the worst?
If the worst did happen, what could I do to cope?	
How else could I view the situation?	
Are there any positives in me or the situation I am ignoring?	

Develop Realistic Expectations

What's a more realistic expectation?	
How much do I believe my original biased expectation now (0-100%)?	How intense are my emotions now (0-100%)?

Experimenting with Biased Expectations

By challenging your biased expectations as you did in the last section (using a Thought Diary), you can now be in a better position to approach situations with an open mind and with more realistic and balanced expectations. The next step of challenging biased expectations is to test them out to see how accurate they really are. This is like a scientist doing an experiment with your biased expectations, to test how true they are.



As with a Thought Diary, there are some steps you have to work through to properly experiment with your biased expectations. Below is an example of how to do this, and on page 11, there is a worksheet to help you complete the process for yourself.

Step 1: Identify Your Biased Expectations

From the first section of your Thought Diary, you will already know what the at-risk situation is and what it is that you have predicted in this situation, and how much you believe it will happen. Also, write down specifically how you will know if your biased expectations have come true. Ask yourself: *What exactly would happen? What would an outsider see happening? What would you be doing? What would others be doing?*

The Situation: <i>Friends invite me to be on their quiz team</i>
My Biased Expectations: <i>I'll be no good; I'll make them lose; I'll make a complete fool of myself; Everyone will see how dumb I am; The others will wish I wasn't on their team.</i>
How much do I believe it will happen (0-100%): 80%
How will I know it has happened: <i>I won't know a single question. Everyone except me will know the answers. The others will make rude comments or glare at me.</i>

Step 2: Identify Your Unhelpful Behaviours

Next you need to identify what unhelpful behaviours you might be engaging in to cope with your negative predictions and anxiety (e.g., avoidance, escape, safety behaviours).

<i>Over-preparing for the quiz (e.g., news, newspapers, trivia books), placing conditions on going (eg., planning to only answer if I am 100% sure), having an escape plan.</i>

Step 3: Remember Your Realistic Expectations

Next remind yourself of the new perspective that you developed from your Thought Diary, as you will also want to test your new realistic expectations against your old biased expectations.

<i>I don't have to be really good, it's just a quiz night. They are my friends, they are just there to have fun and don't really care about winning or who answers what. It's likely that I will be able to answer some questions that are in my area of interest. How I do at a quiz night isn't a reflection of who I am as a person - everyone has their strengths and weaknesses.</i>

Step 4: Identify Your Helpful Behaviours

This involves noting what it is you will do differently to test out your new and old expectations, to see which is more accurate. This is really setting up the experiment and specifying what it is you will actually do. This will generally involve confronting rather than avoiding the situation, staying in the situation rather than escaping, and stopping safety behaviours to see how you go by yourself and without imposing conditions and restrictions on you entering the situation.

Ask my friends if they are doing anything to prepare for the quiz night. If they do any preparation, do only as much as they are doing. If they are not preparing at all, go to the quiz night, without preparing beforehand. Stay at the quiz night until the end, regardless of how I am going with answering the questions. Answer questions even if I am not totally certain. Purposely suggest an answer that I know is wrong.

Step 5: Carry Out the Experiment

Follow through with what you set out to do in Step 4. Carry out the experiment, engaging in the more helpful behaviours you have identified, and see what happens.

Step 6: Evaluate the Results

The last step is to reflect on what actually happened and how this compares to what you were expecting in Step 1. What were the results of the experiment? What did you observe? How does this compare to your biased expectations? Which expectations did the results support (biased or realistic)? What was it like to carry the experiment out and act differently? What did you learn from the experience?

What actually happened? *I answered some questions that were in my areas of interest. I got some questions wrong, but so did others - no one saw it as a big deal. I had a good time. No one seemed to take it too seriously. They seemed to be pleased to have me on their team.*

How much did my biased expectations come true (0-100%)? *10%*

Which expectations were supported by the experiment? *My more realistic expectations.*

What was it like to act differently? *It was hard at first. But not overpreparing, purposely suggesting a wrong answer, and not planning how to escape showed me that I can do this, and that not knowing everything is not so bad.*

What did I learn? *This shows me that what I predict will happen in situations may be guided by my opinion of myself, and may not always be true. So I may need to make my expectations more realistic, act accordingly, and see what happens.*

If the results of your experiment do not support your biased expectations, which is often the case, that is great! It will be important to remember that the next time you find yourself making biased expectations. It will also be important to reflect and ask yourself “What does this mean for you as a person?”

However, should your biased expectations be supported, which may happen at times, it will be important to ask yourself some questions about this. Ask yourself: *Were there any other reasons for the result, aside from who you are as a person? What else was happening at that time? Are there other ways of viewing what happened? What could you learn from the experience to improve or change things in the future?*

It is important to note that not everything we think is inaccurate, or has no grain of truth to it. However, often when we have problems with low self-esteem, we predict negative things about ourselves and our abilities **all the time**, and act accordingly. We never step back to question these predictions or test them out. This is a habit that is important to break. It is the automatic process of predicting the worst, because of our negative view of ourselves that we want to change. It is important to tackle this because if you can make more realistic predictions in your day-to-day life, you will think and act differently, in a manner inconsistent with someone with low self-esteem. Behaving in a manner that is inconsistent with your low opinion of yourself, is the path to overcoming this negative opinion. When you do this, you will start to gather new information about yourself, which will allow you to see yourself in a less harsh, more positive, and kinder light.

Now, it's time for you to do an experiment. Use the worksheet on the next page to help you plan an experiment to test out your biased expectations.

Experiment Record for Biased Expectations

Step 1: Identify Your Biased Expectations

The Situation:
My Biased Expectations:
How much do I believe it will happen (0-100%)?
How will I know it has happened?

Step 2: Identify Your Unhelpful Behaviours

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Step 3: Remember Your Realistic Expectations

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Step 4: Identify Your Helpful Behaviours & Set Up Your Experiment

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Step 5: Carry Out the Experiment (from Step 4)

Step 6: Evaluate the Results

What actually happened?
How much did my biased expectations come true (0-100%)?
Which expectations were supported by the experiment?
What was it like to behave differently?
What did I learn from this experiment?

Module Summary

- Biased expectations occur when it looks likely that your unhelpful rule or assumption will be broken
- Biased expectations involve: overestimating the likelihood that something bad will happen and how bad the consequences will be, as well as underestimating your ability to cope
- Biased expectations will lead to certain types of unhelpful behaviours (eg., avoidance, escape and safety behaviours) and unhelpful emotions (eg., anxiety, nervousness, fear, doubt, uncertainty)
- One way to overcome biased expectations is to challenge or dispute them using a Thought Diary. This involves identifying what you are expecting, challenging your expectations, and developing more realistic expectations
- Another way to overcome biased expectations is to experiment with them. This involves planning experiments to test the accuracy of your expectations, and is based on identifying your unhelpful behaviours and engaging in more helpful behaviour. It will often involve behaving in a manner inconsistent with what you are expecting (eg., approaching challenges, and stopping avoidance, escape, and safety behaviours).



Coming up next ...

In the next module, you will learn to identify and challenge negative self-evaluations, and develop more balanced evaluations of yourself.

About This Module

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that unhelpful negative emotions and behaviours are strongly influenced by problematic cognitions (thoughts). This can be found in the following:

Beck, A.T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B.F., & Emery, G. (1979). *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*. New York: Guildford.

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These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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