***Stress Management Training***

Session Six : Lecture Script

***Challenging Negative Thinking Habits (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy)***

In Session Four we asked you to note your negative thoughts. We mentioned the negative thinking habits of self-blame, comparison to others, impossibly high standards of perfection, concentration on mistakes, ignoring successes, name calling and mind reading. Such negative patterns of thinking daily undermine your sense of self-worth. However, you may be so used to this type of thinking , that these negative thoughts seem reasonable and justified, and you no longer notice the effect they are having on you. No matter how bad or untrue the thoughts are, you tend to believe them. This is very painful to live with, more painful than almost any loss. This is because grief fades with time, but unless you take positive steps to change your thinking habits, your negative thoughts are always with you – undermining, judging, blaming and finding fault.

Negative Thoughts cause stress. If we THINK negatively about a situation, we also FEEL negatively about that situation, regardless of the true facts. Although our negative thoughts are unrealistic, it is very difficult to check up on whether or not they are true. If someone attacks us physically and injures us, we can see we are hurt by examining the injury. But how can we judge whether or not another person is actually rejecting us or criticising us, we may just be misinterpreting their behaviour. Our feelings of distress cannot prove our interpretation is true, because when we think negatively we will have such feelings whether the interpretation is right or wrong.

Often, we think negative thoughts in a kind of shorthand. Words like ‘Stupid’, Weak’, or Pathetic’ may pop into our minds and carry with them strong feelings of self-dislike. Very often too, people find negative thoughts difficult to ‘turn off’, they may seem to have control of your mind, but the truth is, that you are so used to these thoughts that they seem normal and ordinary. However, you do not have to go on living with them. With practice you can learn to change your negative thoughts to positive ones. You have already begun to change your habit of negative thinking, just by being aware of it. If you have kept a record on the Stress Mood Log, you may have begun to notice a pattern to your thinking. Now we can follow this up by looking at the effect our particular patterns of negative thinking have on our lives. The price we pay for negative thoughts is very high. Consider what this continual undermining of your self-worth costs you in terms of family life, friendships and work satisfaction.

When we look at what underlies our negative thinking we very often find it is the belief that most of our troubles and difficulties are caused by events outside our control. *In fact , many of our thoughts and difficulties are caused by our beliefs about those events. F*or example, if you lose your job because there is an economic recession, this is outside your control, but how you FEEL about losing your job and what you do about it, is not.

The next step in challenging our negative thinking is to learn to observe our reactions to events and situations. There is often a gap between the event and our emotional response, but we tend to believe that our response is caused by the event. In fact it is caused by what happens during the ‘gap’, when our beliefs about the event take over. For example, if we call the event of losing a job **A,** and we call our emotional response , which is depression, **C.** There is in fact something that happens at **B,** which is our beliefs about the event of losing a job. ***Most people are only aware of what happens at A, and believe that what happens at C, is caused by A, when actually it is caused by thoughts and beliefs at B***. If we are calling ourselves inadequate and stupid because we have lost a job, and telling ourselves we will never get another one, we will feel depressed. If, however, we recognise that many people are unemployed, and we decide to take the opportunity of unemployment to do something positive, maybe to get closer to our family and friends, or learn to paint or take up karate, then we will not feel so depressed that we have lost our job.

***It is important to remember that negative thoughts don’t just stay as thoughts, they also translate into action***. We do not just have negative feelings about events in our lives, we also have behaviours related to those feelings. If we believe that losing a job is the worst thing in the world, and we become depressed about it, we may well spend half the day in bed, have very low energy and behave in a depressed way. This will have negative effects on our relationships with family and friends. Because we have low energy we have less chance of finding another job. If we do get an interview and turn up with a negative and depressed attitude we are less likely to be employed. What we need to do is learn to fill in the gap and find out what happens at B which affects our feelings and behaviour. We then need to provide ourselves with alternative positive thoughts and behaviours. ***The ABC Form*** helps us to do this. When you use the Form, note the differences between the negative feelings and the positive ones, and take particular note of the consequences in terms of your behaviour.