

# Rewire your mind

*Changing unhelpful thinking habits*

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Flinders University Institute for Mental Health & Wellbeing



Flinders  
University

Institute for Mental Health &  
*wellbeing*

## Want to develop helpful ways of thinking?

In **Part 1 – Learn** of this chapter, you'll learn about different unhelpful thinking styles and ways to develop new ways of thinking.

In **Part 2 – Do**, you'll apply what you've learned to two case examples (CJ and Misha) and try it in your own life.

Then, **we will ask for your advice** on how to share this information with other people who have an eating disorder.

All the stories in this chapter are based on the experiences of real people who have struggled with eating disorders.



## Help us help others!

People tell us the ideas in this chapter are interesting and helpful. But we need your help to learn how to best support people with eating disorders. By sharing your experiences and advice, the more we can help others.



We know that **you are the expert** in your life and have more insight into what it's like to be a person with an eating disorder.

Please complete this chapter thoughtfully and share your feedback at the end to help us learn the best way to present this information to others like you.

Tell us what worked well for you and what didn't, so we can improve and make a real difference **together**.

## Part 1 – Learn!

When someone is struggling with an eating disorder, certain **unhelpful thinking styles** can show up and make things harder to manage.

These are patterns of thinking that aren't accurate or fair, and they can affect how you see yourself, your body, and your eating. Learning to spot these unhelpful thoughts is the first step toward challenging them and thinking in a more balanced way.



Below are some common **unhelpful thinking styles**<sup>1</sup>, along with examples to help you recognise them.

Unhelpful Thinking Style	Description	Example
<b>Mental Filter</b>	Focusing on only one part of a situation (often negative) while ignoring the rest (often positive).	💡💡 <i>A friend took me out for my birthday, but they didn't get me a card, do they still want to be my friend? ”</i>
<b>Jumping to Conclusions</b>	Going with a “hunch” and making conclusions without proof. But some people keep jumping to the wrong (often negative) conclusions.	💡💡 <i>Someone in the group yawned while I was talking, they must think I'm boring.”</i>
<b>Personalisation</b>	Blaming yourself unnecessarily for external negative events, even when you may only partly responsible or not responsible at all.	💡💡 <i>My friend didn't enjoy the party. I didn't make sure they were having a good time; it's all my fault.”</i>

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from <https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/For-Clinicians/Unhelpful-Thinking-Styles> - please check out the website for the helpful handouts.

## Continued.

Unhelpful Thinking Style	Description	Example
 <b>Catastrophising</b>	Believing the worst possible outcome will happen, and thinking it's the only outcome.	 <i>I feel depressed this morning. What if I can't snap out of it and I lose my job?</i>
 <b>All or Nothing Thinking</b>	AKA Black-And-White Thinking. Seeing this as either all good or all bad, all right or all wrong. It's either one extreme or the other, there are no grey areas.	 <i>I got a pass on an assignment, not a distinction. I am a failure.</i>
 <b>"Should" and "Must" Statements</b>	Focusing on how things "should" or "must" be, rather than how it is.	 <i>People should always keep their promises.</i>  <i>I can't believe they just cut in front of my car! They shouldn't drive like that!</i>
 <b>Overgeneralisation</b>	Taking one thing that happened now and assuming it will always happen in the future. It's like taking one bad moment and thinking every similar situation will turn out the same.	 <i>Everyone keeps having a go at me.</i>  <i>Every night those kids have always left a mess!</i>
 <b>Labelling</b>	Assigning a label to yourself or others based on behaviour in a specific situation (usually negative).	 <i>I can't believe I broke a glass; I am such an idiot.</i>
 <b>Emotional Reasoning</b>	Believing that because you feel something it must be true.	 <i>I feel bloated, so I know I have put on weight.</i>

Let's look at an example of someone experiencing unhelpful thinking styles...

**CJ's story:**



*During Year 10 at school, I started to gain weight. I was studying a lot and doing less sport. I was not a confident person and decided I needed to lose weight if I was going to keep my friends.*

*I started to cut back what I ate. By the end of that year, I was not eating during the day, but I was binge eating in the evening. Then I started to make myself vomit after the binges. I told myself I was still in control and could stop whenever I wanted. As I moved on to university and work, my weight increased a bit each year, no matter how much I restricted and vomited.*

*Last year I went to see my doctor to get some help as I no longer felt that I was in control. They said that I didn't need to stay this way forever, and that change was possible. They said that over time, with practice and adequate nutrition every day, I could change my brain and my behaviour.*

*When I started seeing a therapist they said the same thing. They helped me see connections between my long-term thinking styles and my eating disorder. For example, my tendency to catastrophise meant that I always assumed the worst and ate to comfort myself even when things were going well. My tendency to personalise the bad things that happened (assume I had caused them) meant that I was very self-critical, and this really fed into the eating disorder voice and all its criticisms of me.*

## Can you change your unhelpful thinking styles?

Is it true that people can change their thought habits? **Yes!** Brain scientists have discovered that people do things because of the thoughts and feelings they have—and all of these thoughts and feelings live in the brain.



Your brain is made up of tiny cells called **neurons**—and there are about **100 billion of them!** These neurons are always sending messages and making new connections. Every time you think or feel something, your brain builds or strengthens those connections.

**Thoughts** are the things you say to yourself in your head (e.g., “What if nobody likes me?”), and **feelings** are emotions you experience in your body, like fear or sadness.

So, if someone thinks, “No one will like me if they get to know me,” they might start to feel sad—and their brain forms a connection between that thought and feeling. These connections can then affect what they do (their **actions**). For example, someone who feels sad because they think they’re not likeable might start eating less and exercising a lot to try to change their body and feel more accepted by others.



**But the good news is by acting differently, and with adequate nutrition, you can actually build new connections between neurons in your brain.**

When your brain forms new connections, the way you think, and feel can start to change. You can handle challenges in healthier ways, and even parts of your personality can grow. That means **you're not stuck with the same thought patterns forever**—your brain can always learn and change over time.

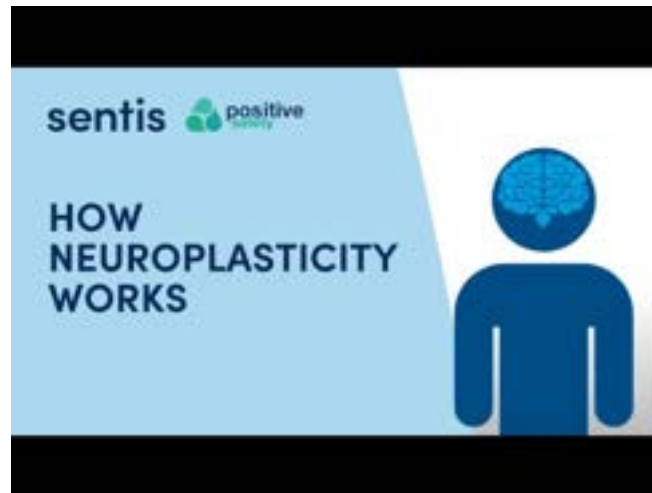


## Everyone's brain is a work in progress.

**Neuroplasticity** is the science that shows our brains can change and form new connections throughout life. These changes are influenced by our environment.

**Stressful or harmful environments** can make it harder for the brain to build new connections, while **positive, supportive environments** help the brain grow and learn in healthy ways.

Watch this video<sup>2</sup> to learn more about neuroplasticity:



Think of the brain like walking trails in the bush.

The trails you use most—**like unhelpful thoughts**—are clear and easy to follow because you've walked them so many times. You take them without even thinking.

But if you want to make a new trail—**a more helpful way of thinking**—it takes work. At first, it's tough. You have to push through bushes and branches, and you might need support or tools to help. But the more you walk that new path, the clearer and easier it becomes. Over time, the old trail gets overgrown and harder to use.

Changing your thinking can be hard at first, but with practice and support, it gets easier and starts to feel more natural.



**Your brain can change in positive ways—and that means, the way you think and even parts of your personality can change too. You're not stuck in old thought patterns forever. By learning new ways of thinking, you can grow into the person we want to be.**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/ELpfYCZa87g?feature=oembed>

The environments that are helpful for forming new neuronal pathways are many and varied. Here are just a few examples:



**Travel** exposes you continually to new experiences and the need for problem-solving.



Learning **music** exercises and develops new parts of your brain.



Learning **new languages** helps grow and strengthen different parts of your brain.



**Reading** books boosts neuroplasticity by helping your brain form new connections.



**Creative and visual arts** help develop less frequently used brain areas.



**Exercise** also supports neuroplasticity, as does **good nutrition**.



**Thinking in new and different ways**, different from your usual patterns, helps rewire your brain and boosts neuroplasticity.



**Practising new ways of thinking in a helpful and supportive environment helps your brain change and makes real growth more likely.**



**Let's look more closely at three different helpful environments.**

## 1. Helpful environment: Exercise

Chances are, if you have an eating disorder, you have experienced problems with **exercise**. You may have avoided it all together or used it primarily to attempt to lose weight. You may find it aversive or triggering.

You can talk to your therapist about finding a way forward that gets the benefits of exercise (improved mood, better long-term health, and increased neuroplasticity) without the harm.

**If you're not underweight or dealing with a medical issue**, make sure any exercise you do is **for your health and enjoyment**—not to lose weight—and **don't go over the recommended limits**<sup>3</sup>.



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<sup>3</sup> This information is available from:

[https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/09/physical-activity-and-sedentary-behaviour-guidelines-adults-18-to-64-years-fact-sheet\\_0.pdf](https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/09/physical-activity-and-sedentary-behaviour-guidelines-adults-18-to-64-years-fact-sheet_0.pdf)

## 2. Helpful environment: Good nutrition

**Good nutrition** is one of the most important parts of recovery from an eating disorder. It creates a healthy, supportive environment for your brain and body to heal.

### Research highlight

Even small amounts of dieting can affect your brain, especially while it's still developing. Without enough food— especially carbohydrates—your brain can shrink and have trouble thinking clearly, solving problems, or managing emotions. It also lowers serotonin, a brain chemical that helps with mood, which can make you feel more down.

Your brain is always changing and adapting based on your environment and how you use it — kind of like how a muscle gets stronger with exercise. Learning new ways of thinking and connecting with others is like “exercising” your brain. But for these changes to happen, your brain needs fuel.

Good nutrition creates a healthy, supportive environment that helps your brain grow and heal. That’s why getting enough food is the first and most important step in eating disorder recovery.



It is recommended that approximately 50% or more of total energy of your diet should come from carbohydrates. **Select at least 4 servings over the day** – examples of servings are below.<sup>4</sup> This supports development of new pathways in the brain.

<input type="checkbox"/> ½ cup muesli	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ Corn Flakes	<input type="checkbox"/> ¾ cup cooked cous cous
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Sustain	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 roll	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked barley
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup All Bran	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 pita bread	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup sweet corn
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Sultana Bran	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 slices bread	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked quinoa
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Just Right	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 fruit toast	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup mashed potato
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked porridge	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 tortillas	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 medium baked potatoes
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ cups Special K	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked pasta	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 large sweet potato
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ cups Rice Bubbles	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked rice	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 cups cooked noodles

<sup>4</sup> This information is available from the Real Food Guide - <https://cbt-t.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/resources>



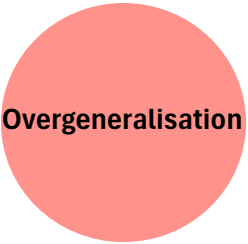


### 3. Helpful environment: Thinking in new and different ways

Trying out **new or different ways of thinking** is easier when you're supported by other helpful and supportive environments.

Here are some things you can try to help you break out of unhelpful thinking habits and start thinking in new, more helpful ways:

Unhelpful Thinking Style	New Perspective	Consider the Questions
 <b>Mental Filter</b>	Consider the whole picture.	Am I taking all the information into account?  What else is going on that I am ignoring?
 <b>Jumping to Conclusions</b>	Move from assumptions to being a scientist in your own life and look for evidence.	How do I know this?  What are some alternative explanations for this?
 <b>Personalisation</b>	Think of all the things that might be causing the problem. There may be a few different factors that are contributing to it.	Was this entirely my responsibility?  What other factors may have affected the outcome?
 <b>Catastrophising</b>	Put it in perspective.	What are the possible outcomes—best, worst and most likely?  Am I jumping ahead of myself?  Does this really matter that much in the long run?  Will it still worry me in a-month?

**Continued.**

<b>Unhelpful Thinking Style</b>	<b>New Perspective</b>	<b>Consider the Questions</b>
 <b>All or Nothing Thinking</b>	The grey area is helpful.	Am I seeing things in an all-or-nothing way?  Is there a middle ground—where things don't have to be perfect, but they're not a total disaster either?
 <b>"Should" and "Must" Statements</b>	Flexibility!	Instead of a strict rule can I develop a guideline?  Can I replace "should" with "I will aim for ..."?
 <b>Overgeneralisation</b>	Be specific.	Does this apply to all situations, or I am overgeneralising?  What are the facts and what are my interpretations?
 <b>Labelling</b>	Judge the situation, not the person.	Does this behaviour or situation reflect how things always are?  Are there examples where this label hasn't been true?
 <b>Emotional Reasoning</b>	Facts, not feelings.	If I was feeling differently, would I still think this?  If a friend told me about this situation, what would I say?

Now let's see how this applies to CJ.

CJ is having thoughts like, “What if I can never stop bingeing and I keep doing this forever?” (catastrophising) and “When my friends say they are too busy to hang out it's all my fault because I am boring” (personalisation and labelling).



What could be some questions CJ could ask herself to try new ways of thinking? Think about what you learnt about the brain and see the table above; it might give you some ideas.

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Thanks for giving CJ advice!



Scientists say the connections in your brain are kind of like being drawn with a pencil, not a permanent marker—they can change.

But changing them takes time, effort, and patience. It's totally normal if things don't shift right away, so it's important to be kind to yourself while you're learning and growing.

**For change to happen in the brain, we need lots of practice using new ways of thinking, good nutrition and helpful environments. But with the right help, anyone can change—you can change too.**



# How can you turn new brain pathways into long-term habits?

Here are three things that science says happens to change the new pathways into habits.

**1. People get more comfortable with a new way of behaving.**

They get more used to the new behaviours and start to see the benefits, which makes them more motivated to keep doing it.

**2. People learn new ways of thinking or learn new skills.**

People can learn to cope with difficult or upsetting thinkings in healthier ways, instead of using unhelpful coping skills like *getting upset with themselves*, *restricting*, or *binge eating*.

**3. People make new relationships and friendships.**

As people learn useful coping skills, they may feel more connected and less lonely. Then, they end up feeling less worried and happier.



## Summary of what we've learned

1. We can shape our thoughts and feelings, and that can change our brain and behaviours.
2. Brain connections aren't fixed—they can change, like pencil marks, with helpful environments and practice.
3. Good nutrition, especially carbohydrates, is essential to allow for your brain to change and grow.
4. People change when they're in helpful and supportive environments, make new friends, and learn new and different ways of thinking.



## Let's hear from other people...

Read Misha's story below.

### Misha's story:



*Misha, 25, is outgoing and driven. She owns a Pilates studio, has a big social media following, and lives by the motto: "Do your best, then go one step further." She's been in lots of short relationships but often felt they took time away from her work and independence. She loves staying busy, getting attention on social media, and has big dreams of building her own franchise.*

*But in her down time, Misha often gets stuck in self-doubt. She feels like she's not doing enough, that her business could be more successful if she just tried harder. Even though she looks confident online, she sometimes feels like a fraud. She worries her work isn't meaningful enough because it doesn't help bigger issues like climate change or social justice. Deep down, she fears that no matter what she achieves, it will never feel like enough—and that she might spend her life working hard but never feeling truly satisfied.*

Misha is struggling with perfectionism, self-doubt, and always feeling like she's not good enough, even though she appears confident and successful on the outside.

Below, read about what actions Misha took to start to change her life for the better.

*I read a book about changing perfectionism and started trying new things. I changed my motto to "Do your best" and focused more on what I did well each day instead of what I didn't finish.*

*After a few weeks, I cut my social media use to one hour a day, set work limits, and made time for fun things like hanging out with friends and reading sci-fi. I also made sure I was eating enough carbohydrates.*

*My clients noticed I seemed more present and easier to talk to. I felt less anxious but just as productive. I still get tempted to go back to old habits, but it's getting easier—and I'm enjoying life a lot more now.*

## Now we need your help...

Now that you've heard the science and heard from other people, we'd like you to share your own story and advice.

We would like to use your story and advice to help other people like you to deal with some of the challenges they may be experiencing.



Share your story...

**Imagine you've had an eating disorder for 10 years and never asked for help. Sometimes you wake up thinking, "Today I'll stop," but by the end of the day, nothing's different. Then one day, you tell your GP what's been going on. They tell you that change *is* possible—that there are treatments that really work—and they offer to refer you to get the help you need.**

**Imagine how you would feel if this happened to you? What kind of helpful thoughts would help you to feel more hopeful and motivated to take action?**

**Use the information you have just learned to help you.**

Share your advice...

Now, imagine that the same event happened to another person just like you.

What could you say to help them understand that they can change?

When deciding what to say, think about what you learned today about personality, the brain, and nutrition.

**HELPFUL TIP:** Sometimes when you find it hard to give yourself good advice, it is easier to think about what you would say to a good friend and then apply it to yourself.





**Thank you for helping us today!**

**And well done – you’ve completed the Rewire Your Mind chapter!**

*Keep Up the  
Good Work!*

Remember:

