Protection Nineteen: Automatic Thoughts

We send ourselves a lot of automatic thoughts each day. This is a phenomenon that occurs for everyone at some level. Your automatic thoughts are often connected to the types of inaccurate thinking you use. For example if you tend to compare yourself to others negatively, your inaccurate thoughts may reflect that. "I'm so fat", "I'm so ugly."

Automatic thoughts take different forms for different people. Some may experience automatic thoughts as sentences flashing through their brain. Others may see pictures of past or anticipated events and situations. Some may experience memories of comments made about them personally. They may hear voices from conversations they have had in the past. Automatic thoughts may be thoughts that you have about yourself, or about what someone thinks of you. They may be thoughts about others, or about the world.

You don't always notice your automatic thoughts. They flash by so quickly that you are frequently consciously unaware of their content. Automatic thoughts are most often negative and they are most often believed. Automatic thoughts will often remain completely unnoticed until you are encouraged to notice and evaluate them.

The examples of automatic thoughts are many and diverse. What they will be for you will depend on what your past experiences have been. They are linked to the forms of inaccurate thinking you use. Some negative automatic thoughts might include:

"I'm such a big loser."

"No one would ever want to be with me."

"I can't do anything right."

"I'm no good at sports."

"I'm fat."

"I'm a bad parent."

Others might include memories of other people making negative comments about you, or examples of times when you feel you have not been successful.

One example of automatic thoughts might be the rerun that happens in your head about a situation you've just experienced. You may find yourself repeating the situation mentally, worrying about it, worrying what people might be saying or thinking about you. Another example of a situation involving automatic thoughts is the woman who feels great about herself in the morning, but by noon has decided that she is a fat slob. As it is unlikely that there was any great weight gain in the four hours from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm, it is likely that she has had automatic thoughts that have led her to an emotional reaction.

This brings us to the reason that automatic thoughts can be so devastating. You

react emotionally to your thoughts. If your thoughts about yourself, others and the world are consistently negative, you will experience consistently negative emotions. This affects your self-concept. When your self-concept is negatively affected, you become at risk of accepting and integrating other people's negative opinions about you. In the context of bullying, when a child begins to accept negative opinions about themselves, and integrate those thoughts and beliefs into their being, they are susceptible to turning the anger that is created towards themselves. They come to believe the negatives that others are handing to them.

In order to prove or disprove automatic thoughts, the thought must be caught, noted and examined for evidence. Learning how to do a thought record will help you to do just that, catch the thought, remain aware of the thought, and examine the thought for supporting evidence, or contradicting evidence. The end result is a more balanced way of looking at self, others and the world that takes into consideration both negative and positive aspects.

Explain to your child:

You have to do something with all those automatic thoughts that you have. Learning balanced thinking techniques can help you to feel confident and sure of yourself.

When you believe the negative messages about yourself, it shows. If you believe you are a loser, or if you think you will never do anything right, you will have trouble standing up straight, talking to people, trouble in all sorts of ways. When you believe the negative messages about yourself, it is hard to feel confident. When someone says something negative about you, you might begin to believe it.

It is important to ask yourself the questions in the next lesson, in order to balance out your automatic thoughts.

It can help to write out the answers to your balanced thinking questions. Sometimes, when you have the same thought over and over you can just look at your answers and feel better.

In a straight association to bullying, children taking on the three roles, might have the following automatic thoughts:

A child using bully actions:
They did it first, so it's okay.
He's a loser anyway, he deserves it.
I'm tough.

A child using victim actions:
What did I do to deserve this?
I'm such a loser.
I wish I had more friends.

A child who is a bystander:
There's nothing I can do.
I'm glad that's not me.
I am scared to do anything.

Activities:

Brainstorm automatic thoughts that you and your child use. Talk about how you each feel when you have those thoughts.

Using the following role plays, take some guesses at what kind of automatic thoughts each person is having:

Tammy and Julie used to be good friends but lately Julie is spending more time with Shelley. Tammy is angry and is yelling at Julie about it. Julie is yelling back.

Billy keeps on bumping into Joey and hip checking him into the locker. Billy says it's no big deal and Joey can't take a joke when Joey tries to talk to him about it.

Marnie and Olivia were good friends but Olivia has been going to parties and drinking and Marnie doesn't want to be involved. Marnie and Olivia are both talking about each other in the hallways.

Go on to the next lesson to learn a balanced thinking tool.