This technique is useful for unearthing and exploring hidden assumptions behind your thoughts. Start with a thought and try to follow it back into your psyche, finding what is behind each thought. Pose some of the following questions. What would be so bad about that? What might happen? What would that mean? Why?



The example below is a true example of a woman who had a lift phobia for 20 years but had never unravelled her thoughts to find out what she was really scared of. She was actually quite surprised at what she found, and recognised that her fantasy at the end of her chain of thoughts was completely irrational.

Thought

Going into a lift would be absolutely awful.

Why would it be upsetting? I don't know. I can't bear even to think about it.

What might happen? I'd press the wrong button and the lift would jam between floors.

What would be so bad about that? Well that would be the end - I'd go crazy.

Why? Because I'd be stuck in the lift, unable to get out.

How long might you be stuck? Well, maybe a couple of days.

What would be so bad about that? I wouldn't have any food or water.

What would that mean? I'd starve - by the time they found me I'd be a withered skeleton, huddled in the corner.

Rational Challenge

It would make me really anxious.

Close your eyes. Think what might happen - these are only my thoughts.

It's possible, but I'd estimate the chances of that happening as one in five thousand.

It wouldn't be the end. I'd get panicky but people can't go mad from being frightened.

It's a glass-fronted lift in a busy store; they'd notice me and get me out.

That's an over-estimation - maybe 30 minutes at most.

They would have got me out. If not, I wouldn't want food, or they would pass it to me.

Nobody starves in two days - I would not be a skeleton.