The Cognitive Model of Abnormality
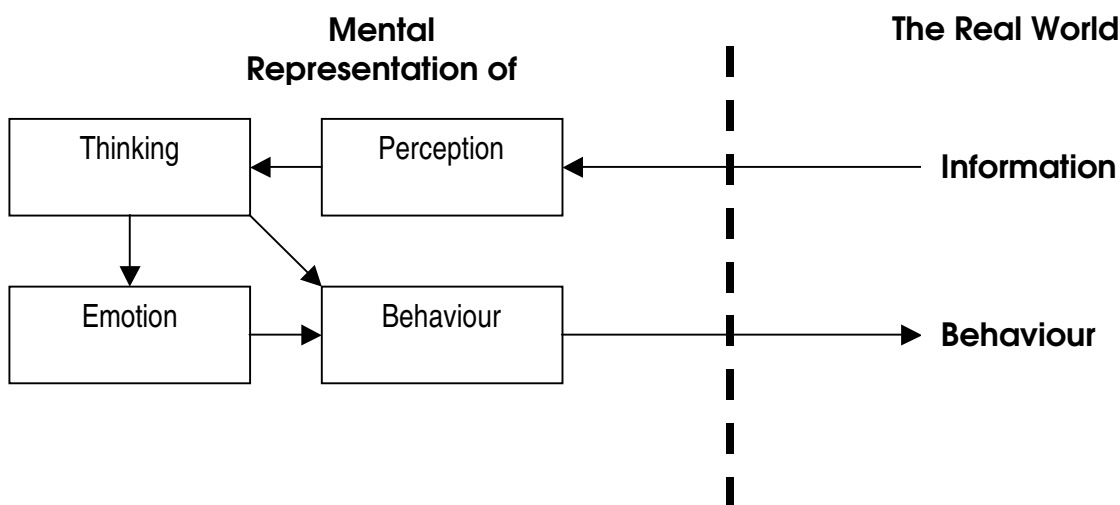
This activity will help you to:

❑ Understand the cognitive model of abnormality
❑ Identify cognitive errors in people's thinking
❑ Apply the cognitive model of abnormality to eating disorders

The Cognitive Model

Cognition means 'thinking'. The cognitive model assumes that abnormal behaviour is the result of abnormal, faulty or maladaptive thinking processes.

Things continually happen in the real world. However, we do not experience them directly. Rather, we form an internal representation of the world. This consists of information from the real world, but filtered through our own perceptions and thought processes. If something goes wrong with a person's perceptual or thinking processes, then this can have an impact on both their emotional experiences and their behaviour. For example:

❑ In **anxiety disorders**, a person may perceive objects or situations as a threat, even if they are not.
❑ In **depression**, a person may interpret bad situations as being their fault, even though they are accidental
❑ In **paranoia**, a person may assume that other people have ulterior motives for their behaviour, when they are innocent of these
❑ In **eating disorders**, a person may misperceive themselves as overweight even though they are underweight.

Like the behavioural model, the cognitive model generally assumes that these faulty thinking patterns are acquired from experience, possibly going right back to childhood. It is often the case that faulty thinking patterns were originally developed to help people cope with abnormal situations, but that they have outlived their usefulness and become unuseful habits. For example, a child who grows up in a dysfunctional family, where people are continually out to undermine each other might develop paranoid thought patterns because this helps them deal with that environment. However, in the wider world, this type of thinking may lead to unreasonable and maladaptive behaviour.

What You Need To Do…

Identifying faulty thinking

Below are some exerpts from interviews with a number of people with psychological problems. For each example:

- ❑ **You must** identify some features that suggest irrational or faulty thinking processes
- ❑ **You should** explain the consequences that these irrational thoughts might have for how the person feels and behaves

Example	Interview Exerpt
23 year-old male	'I can usually cope at work, but social occasions are the absolute worst. As soon as people speak to me I start sweating. I just can't think of anything to say and I'm terrified that I'll say something stupid or accidentally offend someone. My mind goes blank and I start panicking. Everyone else seems to find it very easy to make social chit-chat and I can always think of something afterwards, on the way home, but it's too late by then. If people at work ask me out I usually try and make an excuse if I can. If I can't avoid it, I hang around on the fringes of things, trying not to get noticed, and leave as soon as I can.
42 year-old male	'It gets really difficult at work because everyone's so much better at it than me. They can all cope with the pressure fine but I'm always running like mad just to stand still. When the pressure's really on, I start making mistakes. Like last week I'd spent days preparing this presentation for the management team and an hour before the meeting was due to start, the computer system went down and I lost the lot. I felt so stupid. The boss and everyone else acted OK about it and rescheduled the meeting but I could tell that deep down they were all thinking, "what a loser!" 'Because I'm not as organised as the rest of the team I have to work loads harder to get things done. Before we had the auditors in I was working 60 hours a week on site, and then taking more work home with me but it still wasn't enough. I checked every account three times because I knew there'd be mistakes in there somewhere and it'd be my fault if the auditors found them because I hadn't checked. On the day of the audit I thought it was all OK but then I realised I'd forgotten to ring the water cooler company and order more water. What a disaster – I screwed up again.
26 year-old female	'It's not really about eating. It's more like this stange competition I've got going on with myself. I've always been a bit like this, I suppose. When I was at school I had to do everything perfectly. Whenever a teacher pointed out a mistake I'd made I'd redo the work ten times so I'd never make than mistake again. I was always the first to put my hand up to answer a question but if I gotr the answer wrong I felt absolutely mortified and it was all I could do not to burst into tears. I got ten A*s in my GCSEs and one B. I was completely gutted. I always did loads of sport at school, and I carried on into university. I only competed at county level at school because I wasn't good enough to go any further. I had to stop when I got injured, and that's when I started worrying more about my body. I'd look in the mirror and think "ugh, how gross!" It wasn't so much that I thought I was fat, more like I thought I was ugly but that losing weight would make me look better. It started being another competition with myself or between me and my body. My body was another thing I had to be in control of. As long as I managed not to eat, I was winning. If I ate anything then my gross, ugly body was getting the upper hand and I was falling into failure again. It was never about being attractive to boys. It was about not being a failure.