

# Mental Health Pre-Release Workshop: Inmate Attitudes Toward Release

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*The mental health pre-release workshop is offered to DR&C inmates within 6 months of release, as part of DR&C pre-release policy. The focus of the workshop is identifying inmate attitudes that may be counterproductive to the goals of promoting successful reintegration into society and reducing recidivism. A cognitive-behavioral format is used to discuss 7 “dangerous thoughts”. Realistic and constructive replacement thoughts are presented, and supplied in a handout for each of the dangerous thoughts. A survey is anonymously completed at the outset by the participants, in which they can check one or more of 13 “concerns about release”. Data will be reviewed regarding the concerns endorsed by 211 inmates. The finding that nearly 2/3 of the inmates check only the final option “I don’t have any concerns about release” may imply that lack of awareness or denial of the pitfalls of reintegration into society are significant barriers to reducing recidivism.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

It is well known to prison officials, police department staff, legislators, as well as the general public, that offender recidivism poses a momentous problem for inmates, their families, and society at large. The statistics on recidivism are troubling. For example, a report from the Re-entry Policy Council, a partnership of 10 national organizations, was released early this year (Re-entry Policy Council, 2005). The report found that 97% of the two million Americans currently incarcerated will be eventually released from prison. Yet, 2/3 of those individuals will be re-arrested within 3 years of their release. The reincarceration rate has not improved over the past 30 years. 70% of offenders have significant substance abuse problems, which is a significant factor in the high recidivism rate. This report bolsters pending legislation, “The Second Chance Act of 2004”, which is directed at reducing recidivism, increasing public safety and providing services for ex-offenders upon return to their communities (Mental Health Weekly, 2005). Ex-inmates are challenged by a variety of barriers posed by numerous laws passed since 1980. These restrict job possibilities, ease the requirements for termination of parental rights, restrict access to public welfare and housing subsidies, limit areas in which they can live, and restrict their right to vote. 359 of these “collateral sanctions”, also referred to as “invisible punishments” were identified in a recent symposium, seriously restricting reentry efforts for offenders, especially in the job acquisition area (Wilkinson, 2005).

ODR&C began an initiative called “The Ohio Plan for Productive Offender Reentry and Recidivism Reduction” in 2001 (Wilkinson, 2002). Part of this initiative is a set of pre-release workshops offered to DR&C inmates within 6 months of release, as part of DR&C pre-release policy (ODR&C, 2004). The mental health workshop is one of the set of pre-release workshops. At the Ross Correctional Institution the workshop has been presented twice monthly, starting in early 2004. It is based on the presentation created by David George, Ph.D. of the Hocking Correctional Institution (George, 2003). It is presented once per month to the level 3 or close security inmates nearing release, and also once monthly to the level 1 or minimum security inmates nearing release, who are housed at the adjoining Ross Correctional Camp. The

current author is the principal presenter, with help from Velma Kell and Jim Pratt, psychology assistants, when the author isn't able to present.

What do we know about inmate perceptions of the problems facing them upon release from prison? Inmates regularly announce that they are “scared to death” about being released. They are intimidated by prospects of finding a job, having enough money to support themselves, getting along with their families, staying away from drugs and alcohol, and staying out of prison. While we might assume that the vast majority of inmates share the same concerns and are motivated to maximize their chances for successful re-entry, is this assumption valid? To test this, a survey is presented the beginning of each mental health pre-release workshop.

**METHODOLOGY**

The survey (Attachment A) is anonymously completed at the beginning of the workshop by the participants. The inmates are asked to check one or more of the items if the items apply to their concerns about release. If they have no concerns, they are to check the last item. Originally, the survey was titled: “Fears about release”, and involved 7 items plus a space to write in “other fears” and “I don't have any fears about release” The summary tally of items endorsed is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: FEARS ABOUT RELEASE SURVEY

<u>Survey item</u>	<u># inmates who checked item</u>
I won't be able to find a job	2
I won't have a place to stay	0
I won't have anyone to help me out	0
I'll get in fights with my family	0
I'll get started on booze or drugs again	2
I'll wind up back in prison	3
My victim's family will come after me	2
Other: (unspecified)	1
I don't have any fears about release	16
Total inmates surveyed	22

Beginning in September, 2004, the title of the survey was changed to “Concerns about release”, on the advice of inmates in one of the workshops who felt that “fears” was too strong a term to apply to most of the items. 5 items were also added to the list. The results of these surveys are listed separately for the RCI (level 3) and RCC (level 1) inmates in Table 2.

Table 2: CONCERNS ABOUT RELEASE SURVEY

<u>Survey item</u>	<u># inmates who checked item</u>			<u>% of all inmates surveyed</u>
	RCI	RCC	Total	
I won't be able to find a job	5	27	32	15%
I won't have a place to stay	5	11	16	8 %
I won't have anyone to help me out	2	12	14	7 %
I won't have any money	11	26	37	18 %
I'll get in fights with my family	0	7	7	3 %
My children or wife will reject me	2	7	9	4 %
My parole officer will violate me	1	9	10	5 %
I'll get started on booze or drugs again	5	11	16	8 %
I'll wind up back in prison	2	12	21	10 %
Trouble will follow me from prison	0	6	6	3 %
My victim's family will come after me	0	4	4	2 %
I'll have trouble adapting to a changed society	3	9	12	6 %
Other (RCC None) (RCI Not being placed in an area close to my family)	1	0	1	0 %
I don't have any concerns about release	37 (67%)	99 (63%)	136	64 %
Total inmates surveyed	55	156	211	100 %

When the survey was developed, this author anticipated that most inmates would check one or more of the items, particularly items related to job acquisition, money, housing and family acceptance. In contrast, however, only a minority of inmates registered any concerns, with nearly 2/3 indicating they didn't have any concerns about release. The types of concerns, and frequency of concerns, of the level 1 and level 3 inmates were comparable.

**CONTENT OF MENTAL HEALTH PRE-RELEASE WORKSHOP**

Following the completion and collection of the survey, I address a misperception which most attendees have, that this session is about mental illness. I emphasize that the focus is rather on mental health, that is, maintaining mental and emotional balance as they take on the new challenge of transitioning to the community from prison. I make a statement to the effect: "One theme of this presentation is taking some control over your life. I assume that none of you wanted to come to prison. Therefore, there must be some problem in your attitude or behavior that led you to be here. You need to look at those things or you stand a good chance of coming back." A simplified version of cognitive-behavioral theory is next presented to the inmate participants in a handout (Attachment B). I explain: "One theory of psychology is that thoughts produce emotions, and thoughts and emotions determine our behavior, or what we do. Our thoughts are based on how we look at situations, and that determines how we feel about them. We have choices then in how we react to situations that come up. The way we react then has consequences in our lives."

"For example, you might go out expecting to get a good job and place to live right away. After a month of looking for a job your situation still isn't good, and your housing plans didn't work out. You can look at this problem as a catastrophe, then panic and act impulsively, or look at it as a challenge and keep on trying. The consequence of looking at it as a challenge for you could be successfully getting back into society, getting a job, having a family, etc. Another consequence, if you panic and make poor choices, could be getting in trouble again and coming back to prison. In an effort to provide you with additional tools for transition, this mental health workshop will focus on some key powerful thoughts you are likely to encounter. These thoughts will be powerful challenges that have the potential of upsetting your mental balance. But handled well you can overcome these same challenges to be and become the person you really want to be when you are thinking the best of yourself."

I refer to several well-known individuals who suffered devastating setbacks, but continued pursuing and being successful at their goals nonetheless. Examples include basketball superstar Michael Jordan, who learned to keep his mental balance despite the murder of his father. Other examples were the severe disabilities overcome by actor Christopher Reeve or by Helen Keller. "You will have tremendous challenges too. You will feel the tug of returning to an old way of life you know is destructive, of letting circumstances control your thoughts. We will go over some "dangerous thoughts" that will likely arise as you run into the challenges of readapting to society. We'll also go over some more positive, realistic thoughts you can replace these with so that you make good decisions rather than bad decisions in the face of adversity."

I next distribute a one page handout with 7 "dangerous thoughts" (Attachment C), each of which is a misperception or negative coping strategy common to many released offenders (as well as, for some items at times, to a large percentage of human beings in general). Each dangerous thought is followed by a "realistic thought", which offers a more appropriate or constructive strategy for coping with the problems that will inevitably occur in the process of reintegrating into society. I then distribute 7 cards, each with one of the dangerous thoughts as written on the handout, to 7 inmates in the audience. I tell them that when I call the number of the card, I'd like the card-holder to read the dangerous thought, and explain why or why not they consider that attitude to be a dangerous one.

*Dangerous thought #1:* "Now that I'm out, things are going to be easy. Nothing can be as bad as being in here."

We then discuss that inmate's response in the context of this being an unrealistic expectation. After learning to cope with the structure of prison and the behavior of other inmates an inmate might think he can handle anything. However, prison life provides a safety net not immediately available in society, namely a place to sleep in a heated building, 3 meals per day, medical care, etc. I state that one of the great principles of life is that life is tough. It was tough for you before coming to prison, which may be the reason you committed your crime. It will be tough again when you get out, but now you'll have to find different coping mechanisms, or you may wind up right back here. We discuss some of the changes in society that have occurred in recent years that have made it even more difficult to successfully adapt. These include terrorism fears post 9/11/01, economic downturn, rising gasoline prices, societal attitudes towards felons, esp. sex-offenders, housing and job procurement sanctions imposed by legislation, etc. I dispel the frequently expressed myth among inmates that they can apply for SSI and likely receive disability benefits even in the absence of preexisting conditions.

To prompt further discussion, I ask how many in the group have had previous numbers (usually 1/2- 2/3 raise their hands). I ask anyone who is willing to share how it was when he got out, and what went wrong? Anecdotes given in response frequently involve return to drugs or alcohol, lack of money which led to drug dealing or theft, getting involved again with old criminal associates, problems with family, and problems with parole violations. At the end of the discussion, I present the realistic replacement thought:

*Realistic thought:* "Getting my life back together on the outside will be tough and I need to face the facts. I'll have big challenges rebuilding my life, but I can make it".

*Dangerous thought #2:* "I ain't flippin' burgers. I'll go back to making money the easy way".

We discuss the danger of returning to an easy but destructive pattern. We discuss the fallacy of thinking that I can get away with the illegal activity this one time to get me out of my current jam, and then I'll let it alone after that. I ask if any of the participants had this experience after leaving on a previous number. We talk about the strong pull that old patterns and an old lifestyle have when your new plan just isn't producing the way you would like. This is especially tough when old friends and associates still in your old way of life exert their pull to link up with them again, or are driving new cars, etc. This can be even tougher when some family members try to pull you back to solve their debts and problems. Usually one of the participants will object: "You just can't make it these days on minimum wage!" We then talk about some alternative strategies, such as taking on another, part-time job, getting some training or education that will lead to a better job, making a budget and cutting out unnecessary expenses, etc.

*Realistic thought:* "I'll have to start out slow with my first job, and watch my pennies until I can move on to a better one. Making money the easy way will land me back in jail."

*Dangerous thought #3:* "When I get back to my family (wife, kids, etc.) they're going to treat me like I never left".

The danger here is unrealistic expectations on the offender's or his family's part, of the relationship after a prolonged absence. This may lead to feelings of rejection, anger, and

problems in the relationship. I may ask a series of questions that prompt discussion and problem solving among the participants: How many of you have children? How many will be returning to live with wife/children? How do you expect it will be after you return? How many were previously released and went back to wife/children? What was that like? What did you do to cope with it? How many had mother or father return from prison or a prolonged absence when you were growing up? What was that like for you?

We discuss why family members may be hesitant about the ex-offender's return. They may wonder if the offender will return to his old, destructive patterns, or if prison life has embittered him forever. They likely have their own daily pattern and structure established, and may not want it changed. If one of the children has become a behavior problem, the ex-offender may be put in the difficult role of trying to re-establish a parental bond but also being a firm disciplinarian. We talk about the importance of patience and consistency in relating to fearful children or other family members. We discuss the offender's own need for personal space in the transition period, and how to obtain this in a positive way without offending family. Finally, we may discuss the feelings of rejection that may occur if positive family relationships can't be re-established, and how this may lead to feelings of anger or worthlessness when rejected. We talk about the importance of trying to work out some of these issues with family members before release actually occurs.

*Realistic thought:* "It's going to take some time for them to adjust to me and me to adjust to them. I'm going to have to be patient and not expect too much too fast from them."

*Dangerous thought #4:* "I can't handle it. It's too much and I'm drowning. I'm ready to explode."

The danger here is feeling powerless and hopeless in the face of life adversity and stress. The problem is that once you've given up, you can no longer take advantage of opportunities that might come along to improve your situation. We talk about replacing the negative thought with the reality that as long as I am alive, hope still exists and I retain the power to bring about positive changes in my life. I again refer to well known people who kept going despite great obstacles, e.g., Michael Jordan, Helen Keller and Christopher Reeves.

We talk about stress, that it is a natural part of life. Human beings desire to have a certain amount of stress and challenge, and it's boring if you don't. The key is keeping stress at a tolerable level. I ask the participants for ideas on reducing and controlling stress. Some examples are: exercise, taking a walk, avoiding drugs and alcohol, eating healthy foods, finding a positive support person, taking things one day at a time, and getting help from a mental health center, drug/alcohol support group, church or other organization. We discuss occasions that are appropriate for turning to a family member or friend as a support person, vs. finding a professional counselor or clergyperson for help and advice.

*Realistic thought:* "Setbacks are to be expected but I am not powerless. I can't give up. I need to take it one step at a time".

*Dangerous thought #5:* "Just one drink will help me calm down and then I can figure out what to do".

We talk about how alcohol and drugs impair judgment, despite the possible self-perception of increased confidence or power. When a person gets really stressed he usually wants to just get rid of the anger, anxiety and agitation he's feeling. People have learned that a drink or some drug will often immediately help them feel better. The trouble is that while we may think we're thinking more clearly when intoxicated, actually we're not. Research shows that our thinking ability, physical coordination, driving ability and everything else is impaired if we're intoxicated or high. The other problem, especially for alcoholics is that it's hard to stop at one drink. People also tend to lose their inhibitions when under the influence of drugs, and act impulsively and with poor judgment. You are apt to only make your problem worse if you try to solve it while intoxicated or high.

I have several anecdotes about inmates whose return to alcohol eventually led to reincarceration. Periodically a participant will boast that booze, marijuana or other drugs are the best thing in life, and he fully intends to return to his drug of choice as soon as possible after release. I address this type of comment in the context of establishing priorities in life. The highest priority for offenders after release has to be staying out of prison. Whatever interferes with that goal has to be eliminated. Even if return to substance abuse doesn't directly lead to reincarceration, it will inevitably lead to serious health problems. I ask the participants to examine their priorities, not just in terms of what feels good right now, but in terms of their own and their family's future.

*Realistic replacement thought:* "I usually make bad decisions when I'm high and that will get me back in trouble again".

*Dangerous thought #6:* "There's no point in trying to figure out plans and goals. You can't predict life. I'll just take things as they come, that's the way I've always done it."

The danger in this attitude is approaching life's complex problems without any realistic game plan. You have to have a game plan, especially when you first get out of prison and are trying to re-establish yourself. You need short-term goals, perhaps for the first few days or weeks, and then some longer-term goals for after that. You need to keep your goals flexible so you can adapt to changes, but not just change your plans everytime the wind changes direction. I suggest writing down a set of short and long term goals, and ask if anyone has already done that in preparation for release. We discuss possible goals and time-frames that these might involve. I also suggest the strategy of breaking down complex problems into smaller parts using a written format, and then working on a solution to each part separately, e.g., the process of finding and applying for job openings.

*Realistic replacement thought:* "I do have some control over my life, and need to set up some realistic plans. When things go wrong this will help me get back on track."

*Dangerous thought #7:* "This presentation is silly. My thoughts don't have anything to do with what happens in my life, it's all a matter of luck."

The danger here is seeing yourself as a victim of life, and not taking responsibility for the consequences of your actions. A person who views himself as a victim fails to take

responsibility not only for his actions, but for his life. A person who fails to take that responsibility will always suffer from blaming others about his state in life.

I present the anecdote of an inmate for whom I did a parole risk assessment evaluation who had been incarcerated on and off his whole juvenile and adult life, and was now about 50 years old. He had a whole string of violent offenses for which he was doing time, and also had an extensive Rules Infractions Board (RIB) history during his incarceration, complete with violent offenses against staff and other inmates. I went over each offense with him, and he had an excuse for each one. Either he got set up, was in the wrong place at the wrong time, never committed the offense, etc. As far as he was concerned, he had never done everything wrong and was a chronic victim of the system. In other words, he took no responsibility for his actions. This inmate, on the possible verge of parole, with little in the way of job experience, family support, or responsible attitude toward life, stood a poor chance of successful readaptation to society's challenges.

To summarize, I believe an important part of mental health is gaining some control over your life situation, and the first step to doing that is gaining control over your thinking, your reactions to situations and your behaviors. While life throws us a lot of curves and unexpected situations, the way we react to these things determines our successes and failures.

*Realistic replacement thought:* "My thoughts and attitudes have a lot to do how I handle situations, and what other people think of me. I need to get my head on straight if I'm going to make it."

The Ohio Dept. of Rehabilitation and Corrections has created a listing of county social service agencies (ODR&C, 2003), with each county's agencies listed on 1-3 pages. I offer the workshop participants a copy of the listing for their county.

## **SUMMARY**

The survey results demonstrated an unexpected lack of concerns by inmates on the verge of release, regarding the challenges they expected to face during re-entry. Nearly 2/3 of the inmates surveyed did not endorse any concerns regarding release. Of the inmates who did express concerns, job acquisition and money availability were the items most frequently endorsed by the inmates surveyed, however, only about 1/6 (15% and 18%) of the inmates expressed these concerns. The items "I won't have a place to stay", "I won't have anyone to help me out", "I'll get started on booze or drugs again", "I'll wind up back in prison" and "I'll have trouble adapting to a changed society" were checked by 6-10 % of the inmates, while all other items were checked by 5% or less. The frequency and type of items checked was comparable for the RCI (level 3 security) and RCC (level 1 security) inmates, despite the level 1 inmates usually completing shorter sentences. However, this author's subjective impression during the workshops was of somewhat greater awareness and concern expressed during discussions for the level 1 inmates compared to the level 3 inmates.

What reasons could exist for the apparent lack of concern on the part of the soon-to-be released inmates? The survey is completed anonymously, so there would seem little motivation to downplay concerns because of who may be looking at the results. One possibility is denial of concerns, a sort of bravado summed up in the first "dangerous thought" presented in the workshop: "Now that I'm out, things are going to be easy. Nothing can be as bad as being in here." Another possibility is a lack of awareness of the realities of life in American society,

2005. Inmates who started their sentences prior to 9/11/01 may not understand the impact that concerns about terrorism, and a less robust economic and employment situation, have had on our nation. Inmates incarcerated for a decade or more are likely unfamiliar with much of the impact of electronics technology on society (computers, ATM's, electronic money transfers, cell phones), and especially the frustrations that can be encountered if we run into problems with these devices.

Inmates incarcerated for 15, 20 or more years will remember the person they were when they were previously in society, and not realize the effect of trying to find a job and carry out manual labor with a body that much older than before. While some inmates may feel confident in acquiring unskilled or semi-skilled labor positions in roofing, landscaping, etc. that may be relatively easily to obtain, they may not be looking ahead to the temporary and seasonal nature of many of these positions. Many inmates may not be aware of the various collateral sanctions that have been enacted in recent years by legislatures that restrict job, housing, and public funding access. They may not take account of the complexities and monetary requirements involved in a basic requirement for commuting to most employment: reacquiring a driver's license, insurance, and having reliable transportation.

Consequently, I would suggest that reentry programming needs to focus on the attitudinal as well as the educational component of reentering society. If an inmate doesn't believe he's going to encounter any significant problems, he'll have little motivation to assimilate the wide range of information presented in the various educational, medical and other re-entry workshops. Even though inmates have access to the outside world through television, radio and contacts with family and staff, they may not appreciate the new demands of society on persons who are re-entering it after extended time periods. Perhaps workshops or other interactive exercises for inmates would be of benefit, where discussions would occur of changes in society in occupational demands, racial and religious attitudes, community sanctions against offenders, technology and other areas. This sort of information, with the goal of producing positive attitudinal change, should be presented well in advance of the anticipated release date to allow the offender to start making realistic plans for the inevitable challenges posed by release.

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Attachment A.

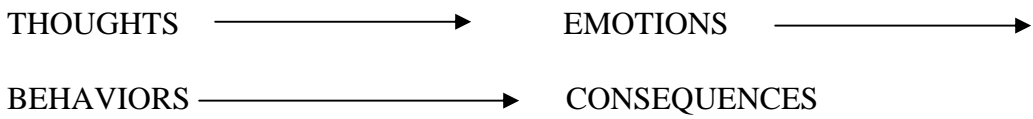
### CONCERNS ABOUT RELEASE

- \_\_\_\_\_ I won't be able to find a job
- \_\_\_\_\_ I won't have a place to stay
- \_\_\_\_\_ I won't have anyone to help me out
- \_\_\_\_\_ I won't have any money
- \_\_\_\_\_ I'll get in fights with my family
- \_\_\_\_\_ My children or wife will reject me
- \_\_\_\_\_ My parole officer will violate me
- \_\_\_\_\_ I'll get started on booze or drugs again
- \_\_\_\_\_ I'll wind up back in prison
- \_\_\_\_\_ Trouble will follow me from prison
- \_\_\_\_\_ My victim's family will come after me
- \_\_\_\_\_ I'll have trouble adapting to a changed society
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other concerns (please list):

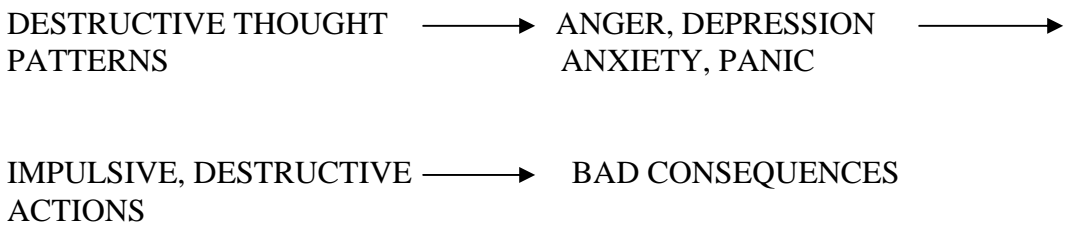
\_\_\_\_\_ I don't have any concerns about release

Attachment B.

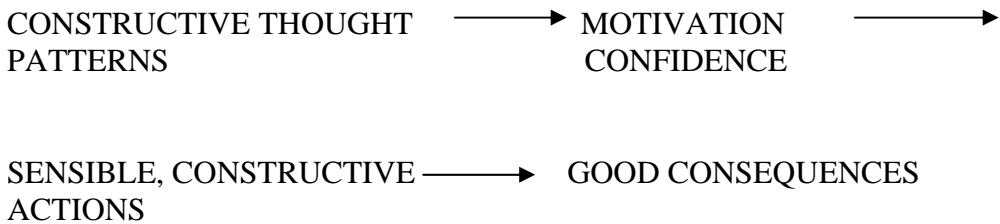
**COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL THEORY OF PSYCHOLOGY**



**NEGATIVE SEQUENCE**



**POSITIVE SEQUENCE**



Attachment C.

## **THOUGHTS THAT MAY THREATEN YOUR MENTAL BALANCE**

*Dangerous thought:* “Now that I’m out, things are going to be easy. Nothing can be as bad as being in here.”

*Realistic thought:* “Getting my life back together on the outside will be tough and I need to face the facts. I’ll have big challenges rebuilding my life, but I can make it”.

*Dangerous thought:* “I ain’t flippin’ burgers. I’ll go back to making money the easy way”.

*Realistic thought:* “I’ll have to start out slow with my first job, and watch my pennies until I can move on to a better one. Making money the easy way will land me back in jail”.

*Dangerous thought:* “When I get back to my family (wife, kids, etc.) they’re going to treat me like I never left”.

*Realistic thought:* “It’s going to take some time for them to adjust to me and me to adjust to them. I’m going to have to be patient and not expect too much too fast from them”.

*Dangerous thought:* “I can’t handle it. I feel like I’m drowning. I feel ready to explode!”

*Realistic thought:* “Setbacks are to be expected but I am not powerless. I can’t give up, I’ll take it one step at a time”

*Dangerous thought:* “Just one drink will help me calm down and then I can figure out what to do”.

*Realistic thought:* “I usually make bad decisions when I’m high and that will get me back in trouble again”.

*Dangerous thought:* “There’s no point in trying to figure out plans and goals. You can’t predict life. I’ll just take things as they come, that’s the way I’ve always done it.”

*Realistic thought:* “I do have some control over my life, and need to set up some realistic plans. When things go wrong this will help me get back on track.”

*Dangerous thought:* This presentation is silly. My thoughts don’t have anything to do with what happens in my life, it’s all a matter of luck”.

*Realistic thought:* My thoughts and attitudes have a lot to do with how I handle situations, and what people think of me. I’ve got to get my head on straight if I’m going to make it. I’m not going to be a victim of life”.