

COPING WITH ANIMAL RIGHTS STRESS



By David Sztybel, Ph.D.

Do you feel helpless and hopeless in response to the extreme speciesism you witness all around you? Does it make you miserable? Are you giving in to cynicism even though you used to think that was “not you”? Are you inspired to hatred, even as it eats away at you?

Here is a free cognitive therapy tool designed to help you in your distress.

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Testimonial



a blue whale's eye

This letter was offered in response to using my cognitive therapy tool offered in this package. Actually I had just sent her my notes for a talk I gave to the Toronto Animal Rights Society in 2005, which contained a much cruder version of the table featured in this document. Her letter is shortened and published with permission. Henriette Van Zyl is a fellow with the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics and is now completing graduate work in psychology in South Africa, studying the killing of healthy animals.

Dear David,

Thank you for your reply to my desperate plea of yesterday.

You will never know how much it has helped me that you responded, that you recognised my hopelessness, and that you truly did give me reason to hope that there is reason to hope; and that I may even be a tiny part of what causes there to BE hope at all.

Your article is enormously helpful, and I feel incredibly grateful to you for sending me something tangible to hold onto myself when the dark thoughts descend, and also that I can pass it on to people around me who are having the same, or similar struggles.

The gift you have given us is that we may hope, help, and even be happy sometimes, even though the things that are happening to animals, are happening to them. Sometimes I feel too guilty to take pleasure in my own dogs, and you have helped me to realise that that is unnecessary and paralysing, and that it is my very pleasure in my dogs that gives me the strength to carry on fighting for all animals, even those whom I personally cannot help.

Thank you, truly thank you. You will honestly never know how far your kindness has reached.

Blessings and Joy to you,

Henriette





Introduction

If we were all at peak psychological health, what could we accomplish? Most animal rights activists have had the blues, or at least the blahs, in response to how animals are treated. It is so awful to see the extremes of speciesism today in contemporary factory farming, vivisection, and so on and on. It is so frustrating that the wheels of change are so slow, or even doubtful as to their existence. It is potentially downright depressing for a normal, healthy human being trying to come to grips with these realities. It is potentially demoralizing. Well, it has been brought to my attention that a powerful method of combating the blues/blahs is cognitive therapy.

Cognitive therapy is based on the idea that what we think and believe can profoundly influence how one feels. Actually, this principle is a fact. A cognitive therapy exercise, popularized in Dr. David Burns, *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, is the “triple-column technique,” in which one subjects negative or unrealistic thoughts to detailed examination. One can identify actual cognitive errors which commonly produce painful and depressing thoughts, and propose a better way of thinking instead. In this booklet I apply the triple-column method to common thoughts that animal rights activists have which make them feel miserable and ineffective, or just bluer, more bitter, and less effective.

It helps if you actively **work through** the rethinking suggested in this booklet. The more passive or distanced you are, the less effective or beneficial it will be. There are different ways of being active:

1. Thinking actively while reading. Apply the technique to your own thoughts.
2. Writing out those thoughts that you agree with in the triple columns, recasting as you see fit.
3. As a shorter exercise, writing down only selected thoughts, such as certain positive ones.

Enjoy!

Common Destructive Thoughts for Animal Rightists



1. I have carniphobia: I hate meat-eaters.
2. The world is predominantly speciesist. Speciesism is evil. Therefore the world is predominantly evil.
3. Individuals cannot make a difference to this enormous injustice that is speciesism.
4. We are supposed to be very sensitive to animals. But if we allow this, we must go mad, given the kinds of suffering they endure, the numbers of sufferers, and the lives made or allowed to be full of suffering.
5. Animal rights is overwhelmingly hopeless because the situation *is* hopeless for billions of animals who suffer and die under oppression.
6. I would be selfish to have any regard for my own frivolous pleasures while beings all around me suffer and die.
7. Speciesists are creeps, curmudgeons, idiots, etc.
8. We cannot change things substantially in our lifetimes, therefore there are no real solutions and we will die as failures.



9. The harder I try to convince people, the more their defences go up.
10. Animal rights is a thinking person's philosophy. However, most people do not think for themselves, so the animal rights movement is bound to fail.
11. The media cover animal rights stories less and less, so outreach efforts are hopeless.
12. So long as there is money to be made off animals, people will always exploit them.

Now...

Do at least some of these statements seem like immutable truths to you?

Do you think any good and honest person must think such thoughts?

Think again...

And when you think again, feel anew...because your thoughts influence your mood!

A consideration of certain cognitive errors will help us start to rethink.



Ten Common Cognitive Errors

The cognitive errors are really mistakes in reasoning or forming beliefs. They are very common and afflict not only everyday people, but even academics, including logicians, who lapse into such common ways of thinking. This is a list of the common errors that we need to catch ourselves making and undo, lest we lapse into the blues perhaps without even knowing why:

1. **ALL OR NOTHING THINKING.** This involves viewing states of affairs in terms of black and white categories. For example, falling short of perfection may be viewed as an absolute failure. By contrast, a more realistic view might see aspects or degrees of success.
2. **OVERGENERALIZATION.** One might see a single negative event as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3. **MENTAL FILTER.** Dwelling exclusively on one negative aspect of a situation.
4. **DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE.** Somehow, the positive doesn't count for some reason.
5. **JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS.** Classic examples include "mind reading," or feeling sure about what someone else thinks or feels even without conclusive evidence, and the "fortune teller error," offering predictions of the future without a solid basis.



6. **MAGNIFICATION.** There are two extremes: (a) *catastrophizing*, or characterizing something as extremely bad which might exaggerate how bad something is in the big scheme of things; and (b) *minimization*, or minimizing merits of someone or some situation.
7. **EMOTIONAL REASONING.** One feels something, so one assumes it must be true. For example, one feels hopeless so one assumes there is no hope. Or one feels dread so one feels sure that something bad is about to happen.
8. **SHOULD STATEMENTS.** Statements with “should” can *sometimes* needlessly make oneself feel guilty. If one judges what others should do, in *some* cases this leads to needless anger, frustration, or resentment.
9. **LABELING AND MISLABELING.** Much language involves labeling, but what is really at work here are absolute labels, or mislabeling by using highly colored and emotional language. For example, one might label someone a “creep,” thus applying a covering of pure negativity over that person, even though, realistically speaking, people have both positive and negative qualities.
10. **PERSONALIZATION.** In these cases, one perceives oneself to be the cause of some negative external event, even though one is not (primarily) responsible for it.

Hopefully these seem relatively straightforward. I will now go on to demonstrate that the common thoughts listed earlier are actually rife with these cognitive errors.



Think Again!

We will try to adjust the foregoing and related thoughts.

We will use the powerful tool referred to as the triple-column technique.

The three columns are organized as follows:

1. The first column lists the “toxic thought” that makes you feel so miserable.
2. The second column lists the cognitive errors, listed above, that are involved.
3. The third column offers substitute thinking, or rational self-defence against negativism.

Toxic Thought	Cognitive Errors	Substitute Thoughts
<p>1. I have carniphobia: I hate meat-eaters.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All or nothing thinking. This thought tends to see meat-eaters as all bad, without any redeeming qualities. They might have many good qualities that, once contemplated, make hatred of them impossible, even if we might strongly dislike, say, their speciesist aspects. 2. Overgeneralization. This thought is timeless, and therefore is prone to seeing meat-eaters as they are for life. But they might change. 3. Mental filter. Dwelling only on negative points. What about loveable or likeable traits? Why must these count for nothing? 4. Disqualifying the positive. See above. 5. Jumping to conclusions. Commits the fortune teller error, predicting that meat-eaters, for example, won't change. Yet I know of one previously hostile, dismissive, and negative family member who went vegetarian, even though I thought that he was the last person on the planet who would do so. 6. Magnification. Exaggerates the faults of meat-eaters: are they evil or conditioned to carry on destructive habits? Also their merits are minimized. 7. Should statement. One 'should' convert this person or everyone, even if that may not be possible. As philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote, one should not say something ought to be if it <i>cannot</i> be. We are not required to realize the impossible. 	<p>I was once a meat-eater, or at least most animal rights people I know and respect were once meat-eaters. Although there is guilt in meat-eating, there can be innocence-in-guilt, paradoxically, if people act out of ignorance or because they feel unable to cope with changing their habits. Everyone has both good points and bad points. If we are as compassionate as we preach, we will have tolerance and patience with others. If we experience anger, that energy is best channelled into activism. If directed against others too much, anger will repel them from changing, not impel them to transform.</p>

Toxic Thoughts	Cognitive Errors	Substitute Thoughts
<p>2. The world is predominantly speciesist. Speciesism is evil. Therefore the world is predominantly evil.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All or nothing thinking. This thought tends to evaluate the world in simplistic terms as either all good or all evil. In this case, the latter. 2. Overgeneralization. From some wicked acts occurring (keeping in mind that there can be innocence and guilt mixed together—see last table) it is overgeneralized that evil pervades everywhere. 3. Mental filter. All of the good is unfairly and destructively sucked away from this view of the world. 4. Disqualifying the positive. See above. 5. Jumping to conclusions. This negative thought quietly presupposes that the treatment of animals is the only determining factor of the moral worth in how the world carries on. 6. Magnification. Magnifies how animals are treated abusively, but like the news, ignores all the good cases. 7. Emotional reasoning. One might feel emotional recoil from the world at times, and then jump to the conclusion that it is entirely worth recoiling from. 8. Labeling. Unfairly and negatively labels the whole world as mostly 'evil'. 	<p>The world is full of people doing good every day. Perhaps most people mostly seek to do good their whole day. If they do not perceive animals as worthwhile in themselves, to that extent these same people may still be perceived as <i>potentially</i> good. Considering the actual good and the potential good in this world is very inspiring.</p>

Toxic Thought	Cognitive Errors	Substitute Thoughts
<p>3. Individuals cannot make a difference to this enormous injustice that is speciesism.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All or nothing thinking. Here we have the thinking that we can either make a difference or not. Nothing in between, no degrees. 2. Oversgeneralization. From not being able to make a difference in some cases, this is wrongly thought to be true in all cases. 3. Mental filter. This belief dwells only on what we cannot change, ignoring both what we personally can change, and what a great movement that we can play a part in can alter. 4. Disqualifying the positive. Omitting ways one can change things. 5. Jumping to conclusions. From limited abilities one mistakenly infers no ability. 6. Magnification. Blows up the cases in which one can make no difference, deflating the cases in which change is really possible. 7. Emotional reasoning. One feels helpless at times so one wrongly infers that one is helpless. 8. Should statement. There is perhaps a background belief operating here to the effect that one should be able to change speciesism all at once, otherwise it is not really 'changing speciesism'. 9. Personalization. This thought tends to make changing the whole world into one's own personal responsibility, which is absurd, because such accountability is totally beyond one's powers. 	<p>It is true that we cannot have much of an effect on speciesism as a whole. But we can have a great effect on parts of that whole. Individuals are the only entities that can change things and will change things. Every group is only made up of individuals. With every drop in the ocean there is a ripple effect.</p>

Toxic Thoughts	Cognitive Errors	Substitute Thoughts
<p>4. We are supposed to be very sensitive to animals. But if we allow this, we must go mad, given the kinds of suffering they endure, the numbers of sufferers, and the lives made or allowed to be full of suffering.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All or nothing thinking. Here we are supposedly face with a stark choice between insensitivity or madness. 2. Overgeneralization. From being understandably upset over animal abuse, one obsessively generalizes this to the point where this is all one thinks about. 3. Mental filter. One filters out being sensitive also to good things in our world. 4. Disqualifying the positive. What about the joys in life, such as terrific vegetarian cuisine, and other goods? 5. Jumping to conclusions. It does not follow from being sensitive that one must go mad. 6. Magnification. Allows bad to be overblown, and all good things reduced to the vanishing point. 7. Emotional reasoning. One feels horrified, despairing, or enraged, so one assumes that this is ALL that one could feel with great intensity—hence the “madness.” One assumes that the world is altogether hopeless because that is how one now feels. 8. Should statements. This train of thought rather presupposes that one “should” be sensitive to the point of mental imbalance. 9. Personalization. Often accompanying this mindset is the idea that every problem facing animals is one’s own to solve, or one’s own responsibility, although one can only shoulder so much. 	<p>Ingrid Newkirk said in a speech, ‘We will be absolutely strong’ in fighting the abuse of animals. If our sensitivity gives us enough of a sense of something to be changed, our good sense gives us the further idea that to be useful, we must be strong. We are aware of others’ suffering not to add to the suffering in this world but to change it if possible. We can better help the animals, and influence others, if we exude basic happiness and positive energy rather than spreading around misery, negativity and despair. Peoples’ inside happiness may gradually flood out to produce a happy world.</p>

Toxic Thought	Cognitive Errors	Substitute Thoughts
<p>5. Animal rights is overwhelmingly hopeless because the situation <i>is</i> hopeless for billions of animals who suffer and die under oppression.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All or nothing thinking. One simplistically assumes that animal rights is only “hopeless” or “hopeful,” without degrees of hope in certain cases and utter hopefulness in others. 2. Overgeneralization. From hopeless cases one mistakenly infers that all things, or the general state, must be that way. 3. Mental filter. Filters out the ways in which we can make a real difference. 4. Disqualifying the positive. Ignores both progress made and what is in progress behind the scene, as well as progress that will be achieved in future. 5. Jumping to conclusions. One concludes that all is hopeless from the fact that some things are, and commits the error of the fortune teller, predicting that all will be cause for despair. 6. Magnification. Blows up the hopeless and deflates the hopeful or even more than hopeful—what is truly (to be) realized as positive. 7. Emotional reasoning. One feels despair at times so one universalizes that the world fits one’s mood. 8. Should statements. One assumes that activists ‘should’ come up with instant solutions to all problems, but one cannot say that anyone ought to do the impossible. 9. Labeling. Labels all as ‘hopeless’—misleading language. 10. Personalization. One may experience all lack of progress as one’s own personal frustration in the realization of one’s own goals as an agent. 	<p>We must find hope where we can. Successful actions though are more than hopeful. Hope at the micro level adds up to hope for macro changes. Great things on the way are also beyond your imagination, so be overwhelmed by that as well in your hoping! Process goals satisfyingly focus on what we as individuals can do, and support what a great movement alone can do. A movement’s frustrations must be shared by everyone, not shouldered by anyone in isolation.</p>

Toxic Thought	Cognitive Errors	Substitute Thoughts
<p>6. I would be selfish to have any regard for my own frivolous pleasures while beings all around me suffer and die.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All or nothing thinking. One simplistically assumes that one is either selfish if one has regard for one's own good or unselfish if one has no regard for one's own good. 2. Overgeneralization. From the fact that some attention to self may be self-indulgent, one infers that all self-concern is selfish. 3. Mental filter. Filters out cases of healthy self-regard. 4. Disqualifying the positive. Ignores benefits to self and others that come from attending to one's own happiness, and thus not spreading around misery or even indifference. 5. Jumping to conclusions. Assumes selfishness is the case merely from paying some attention to oneself. 6. Magnification. Focuses on actions to benefit self, ignoring one's actions to help and respect others. 7. Emotional reasoning. One feels guilty enjoying anything while others are miserable. From this feeling one infers one really is guilty of something wrong, resents oneself, and calls oneself 'selfish'. 8. Should statements. Presupposes idea that one should not do good unto oneself. 9. Labeling and mislabeling. Pejorative label, 'selfish', as if one is only concerned with oneself if one allows occasional self-benefit. 10. Personalization. Assumes all problems in the world are one's own personal responsibility, and <i>always</i> so, and if one ever deviates from this, one is a 'failure'. 	<p>It is not necessarily selfish to have regard for one's own good. The good life is ideal, not just a not-bad life, and one can wish a good life for everyone. No one, including oneself, is a mere instrument to help others, just as animals are no mere instruments. If we spread around misery, we do not make animal rights seem appealing to the uninitiated. But more than that, happiness helps to fortify us to carry on our struggles with vigour.</p>

Toxic Thought	Cognitive Errors	Substitute Thoughts
<p>7. Speciesists are creeps, curmudgeons, idiots, etc.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All or nothing thinking. Labels paint over speciesists as only bad or evil. 2. Overgeneralization. From the fact that they commit some injustices, however many, that they never do anything right or good. 3. Mental filter. Ignores positive or even endearing qualities of speciesists. 4. Disqualifying the positive. See above. 5. Jumping to conclusions. Leaps to conclusions about whole being and doings of speciesists from only some of their actions. Fortune-teller error: predicts never-ending pattern of speciesism even though long-time speciesists sometimes relent in their ways. 6. Magnification. Blows up attention to negatives, reduces attention to positives. 7. Emotional reasoning. One feels resentment and dislike for speciesist things that speciesists do, and these feelings cause one to have only negative regard for these people. 8. Should statements. Assumes speciesists should act otherwise, even if it is impossible, that is, even if they do not know any better, are not sufficiently philosophically convinced, or find themselves unable to alter their habits at this time. 9. Labeling. Classic negative labels—creep, and so forth—would cover over others in pure negativity, concealing any actions or qualities of worth. 	<p>Totally negative labels are inherently unfair, since no one is all-bad. They inspire negative feelings that are unpleasant for everyone and that repel rather than attract converts. Insults are literally ‘terms of abuse’, abusing those targeted and our own powers of judgment. Target choices specifically, not people as wholes. Speciesists need help overcoming speciesist myths, habits, much as anyone would rather be helped to better thinking rather than merely insulted.</p>

Toxic Thought	Cognitive Errors	Substitute Thoughts
<p>8. We cannot change things substantially in our lifetimes, therefore there are no real solutions and we will die as failures.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All or nothing thinking. Looks only at what cannot be changed. 2. Overgeneralization. From some intransigence, it is assumed that nothing will ever change. 3. Mental filter. Filters out how things have changed, e.g., the banning of fox hunting in Britain, which was once considered an immovable institution of powerful aristocrats. 4. Disqualifying the positive. Ignores positive changes. 5. Jumping to conclusions. Assumes that from movement failure to change everything at once, this means that oneself is a failure. 6. Magnification. Blows up stubborn cases and reduces actual and possible success stories. 7. Emotional reasoning. From understandable frustration, one ends up condemning oneself as useless or incompetent. 8. Should statements. Assumes one should change everything in one's lifetime even if that is patently impossible. 9. Labeling. Labels self as 'failure', as if all one ever does is fail. 10. Personalization. Takes on all movement goals as one's own personal responsibility, rather than locating responsibility for social movements in society more generally. 	<p>The thought that anti-speciesists must die as failures does not distinguish short- from long-term. Short-term activism adds up to long-term solutions. Largely silent opposition to animal abuse can gradually transform into very vocal voting for its abolition. We can have a series of successful actions as individuals, whatever the state of the movement. It is inappropriate and perhaps even a delusion of grandeur to take personal responsibility for the entire movement. Individually, we can very much live and die as successes in the animal rights movement.</p>

Toxic Thought	Cognitive Errors	Substitute Thoughts
<p>9. The harder I try to convince people, the more their defences go up.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All or nothing thinking. People are portrayed as hopelessly resistant, without degrees or exceptional cases. 2. Overgeneralization. From the fact that some resist activist efforts, it is overgeneralized that one can only meet resistance. 3. Mental filter. Filters out 'moments of truth' and personal transformation in others. 4. Disqualifying the positive. Ignores how people are convinced for the better every day through activist messaging. 5. Jumping to conclusions. From some frustration in changing others, that goal is inferred to be hopeless. 6. Magnification. Blows up resistance, shrinks away receptivity in others. 7. Emotional reasoning. One feels frustrated and from there one generalizes that reality itself is hopelessly frustrating. 8. Should statement. May assume that one 'should' convert everybody in the world or that one meets even if that is impossible. 9. Personalization. One takes responsibility for <i>others'</i> responses to oneself, which is mainly their responsibility. 	<p>Over-aggressive activism is counterproductive. Defences do not go up so much if activists are merely assertive and rational. One cannot force others' choices anyway so we merely alienate others by being too forceful. Aggression reflects back on the aggressor, creating frustration, alienation, coldness, and hostility. Yet one should not give up. Even meat-eaters probably will respect one less, deep down, if one backs down from one's animal advocacy. We should not take responsibility for others' responses to us, which are mainly their responsibility.</p>

Toxic Thoughts	Cognitive Errors	Substitute Thoughts
<p>10. Animal rights is a thinking person's philosophy. However, most people do not think for themselves, so the animal rights movement is bound to fail.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All or nothing thinking. Assumes that all animal rights supporters are intense thinkers. 2. Overgeneralization. From the fact that many people do not think for themselves, it is assumed that this is always the case. 3. Mental filter. Filters out cases of people who do think and activate for animals. 4. Disqualifying the positive. Ignores strides of progress made in people's thinking and through other means. 5. Jumping to conclusions. From the fact that most people are not deep thinkers it is inferred that all is hopeless, whereas anti-racism is also a thinking person's idea, but not everyone is a theorist about the topic. 6. Magnification. Blows up thoughtless resistance, minimizes thoughtful and compassionate change. 7. Emotional reasoning. From feelings of discouragement regarding education about animal issues, one assumes that the movement faces an impossible wall for all time. 8. Should statement. Assumes that one should change everyone using 'deep theory'. 9. Labeling and mislabeling. An elitism pervades this thought that only 'deep thinkers' can change or make a difference. 	<p>If we can convince thoughtful leaders and role models, the rest may follow these role models. This makes sense since few in society are leaders, and most are followers. Also, not all animal rights supporters are 'thinker' types. Many are compassionate or go by a perception of injustice that is not necessarily articulate in theoretical terms. We can sometimes change people without necessarily addressing them as thinking people using theories or evidence.</p>

Toxic Thought	Cognitive Errors	Substitute Thoughts
<p>11. The media cover animal rights stories less and less, so outreach efforts are hopeless.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All or nothing thinking. Sees only lessening, does not regard ever-increasing record of media coverage with each passing year. 2. Overgeneralization. From some cases of the media ignoring animal issues, it is implied that there are no or insignificant media successes. 3. Mental filter. Looks only at lack of coverage, not successes. 4. Disqualifying the positive. See above. 5. Magnification. Minimizes how media sees the public as already aware of animal rights protesting, which is indeed increasingly true. 6. Emotional Reasoning. Some media outreach efforts are frustrating, so one generalizes this feeling into a sense of the media being hopeless. 7. Should statement. Implicit here is the thought that activists “should” blanket the media with every action, even though that is impossible. 8. Labeling. Labels all as ‘hopeless’—misleading language. 9. Personalization. Often found here is the paralyzing assumption that activists have to reverse this media tendency, although it is due to factors beyond one’s control. One cannot do that, although one can adapt by creating media interest in a fresh way. 	<p>Declining media coverage of animal abuse industries means that in the judgment of the media, people already know about animal rights opposition to various practices. Other means of education such as leafleting and humane education in the schools are also important. More people are talking about these issues and more and more positive change is occurring around the globe. Greater numbers of students than ever, for example, know about animal rights issues through alternative media on the internet. And they are the leaders of tomorrow.</p>

Toxic Thought	Cognitive Errors	Substitute Thought
<p>12. So long as there is money to be made off animals, people will always exploit them.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All or nothing thinking. Assumes there is only the possibility of people making money out of speciesist practices. 2. Overgeneralization. From the fact that many will not relinquish speciesist money-making, it is inferred that no one will, or that society will never outlaw oppressive practices. 3. Mental filter. Filters out cases in which people have changed, and societies as well. 4. Disqualifying the positive. See above. 5. Jumping to conclusions. From the fact that some will not give up making a killing to make a living, that this is the only prevailing trend. 6. Magnification. Blows up greedy cynicism, reduces virtuous responses. 7. Emotional reasoning. Discouraged about human greed, so it is assumed that this feeling can dictate one's picture of the entire world. 	<p>Slavery and paying workers without a minimum wage led to greater profits for exploiters but these too went the way of the dodo.</p>



New Constructive Thoughts for Animal Rightists

Consider that there are ten types of cognitive errors for triple-column purposes. This means that for all of the twelve thoughts considered here, out of a superficially conceivable 120 errors, we count 105 mistakes in which these thoughts are potentially complicit. This means that on average, each thought commits 88% of all possible errors. For the first 11 thoughts the rate is a staggering 90%. Let us leave behind the destructive thoughts that are unrealistic as well as sagging with negativism. They make us feel miserable and yet are unwarranted. Let us now collect together just the thoughts that are bereft of cognitive errors, and see how they make you feel on the whole:

I was once a meat-eater, or at least most animal rights people I know and respect were once meat-eaters. Although there is guilt in meat-eating, there can be innocence-in-guilt, paradoxically, if people act out of ignorance or because they feel unable to cope with changing their habits. Everyone has both good points and bad points. If we are as compassionate as we preach, we will have tolerance and patience with others. If we experience anger, that energy is best channelled into activism. If directed against others too much, anger will repel them from changing, not impel them to transform.

The world is full of people doing good every day. Perhaps most people mostly seek to do good their whole day. If they do not perceive animals as worthwhile in themselves, to that extent these same people may still be perceived as *potentially* good. Considering the actual good and the potential good in this world is very inspiring.



It is true that we cannot have much of an effect on speciesism as a whole. But we can have a great effect on parts of that whole. Individuals are the only entities that can change things and will change things. Every group is only made up of individuals. With every drop in the ocean there is a ripple effect.

Ingrid Newkirk said in a speech, ‘We will be absolutely strong’ in fighting the abuse of animals. If our sensitivity gives us enough of a sense of something to be changed, our good sense gives us the further idea that to be useful, we must be strong. We are aware of others’ suffering not to add to the suffering in this world but to **change** it if possible. We can better help the animals, and influence others, if we exude basic happiness and positive energy rather than spreading around misery, negativity and despair. Peoples’ inside happiness may gradually flood out to produce a happy world.

We must find hope where we can. Successful actions though are **more** than hopeful. Hope at the micro level adds up to hope for macro changes. Great things on the way are also beyond your imagination, so be overwhelmed by **that** as well in your hoping! Process goals satisfyingly focus on what we as individuals **can** do, and support what a great movement alone can do. A movement’s frustrations must be shared by everyone, not shouldered by anyone in isolation.

It is not necessarily selfish to have regard for one’s own good. The good life is ideal, not just a not-bad life, and one can wish a good life for **everyone**. No one, including oneself, is a mere instrument to help others, just as animals are no mere instruments. If we spread around misery, we do not make animal rights seem appealing to the uninitiated. But more than that, happiness helps to fortify us to carry on our struggles with vigour.



Totally negative labels are inherently unfair, since no one is all-bad. They inspire negative feelings that are unpleasant for everyone and that repel rather than attract converts. Insults are literally ‘terms of abuse’, abusing those targeted and our own powers of judgment. Target choices specifically, not people as wholes. Speciesists need help overcoming speciesist myths, habits, much as anyone would rather be helped to better thinking rather than merely insulted.

The thought that anti-speciesists must die as failures does not distinguish short- from long-term. Short-term activism adds up to long-term solutions. Largely silent opposition to animal abuse can gradually transform into very vocal voting for its abolition. We can have a series of successful actions as individuals, whatever the state of the movement. It is inappropriate and perhaps even a delusion of grandeur to take personal responsibility for the entire movement. Individually, we can very much live and die as **successes** in the animal rights movement.

Over-aggressive activism is counterproductive. Defences do not go up so much if activists are merely assertive and rational. One cannot force others’ choices anyway so we merely alienate others by being too forceful. Aggression reflects back on the aggressor, creating frustration, alienation, coldness, and hostility. Yet one should not give up. Even meat-eaters probably will respect one less, deep down, if one backs down from one’s animal advocacy. We should not take responsibility for others’ responses to us, which are mainly **their** responsibility.



If we can convince thoughtful leaders and role models, the rest may follow these role models. This makes sense since few in society are leaders, and most are followers. Also, not all animal rights supporters are ‘thinker’ types. Many are compassionate or go by a perception of injustice that is not necessarily articulate in theoretical terms. We can sometimes change people without necessarily addressing them as thinking people using theories or evidence.

Declining media coverage of animal abuse industries means that in the judgment of the media, people already know about animal rights opposition to various practices. Other means of education such as leafleting and humane education in the schools are also important. More people are talking about these issues and more and more positive change is occurring around the globe. Greater numbers of students than ever, for example, know about animal rights issues through alternative media on the internet. And they are the leaders of tomorrow.

Slavery and paying workers without a minimum wage led to greater profits for exploiters but these too went the way of the dodo.

It doesn’t feel so bad to think **these** thoughts, now does it? And with good reason: these thoughts are positive in orientation. Yet the thoughts themselves are made with good reason, or without the errors in logic embodied in the cognitively erroneous beliefs.

Other Proven Coping Strategies

There are many general approaches that have a proven track record in significantly reducing and managing stress. Here are some of them:

- taking joy in animal companions, free-living animals, and sanctuary residents
- find communities of like-minded folk, e.g., animal rights groups, conferences, etc.
- physical exercise
- yoga
- meditation
- deep breathing
- environmental enhancements to beautify your space
- socializing
- going out into nature
- humour
- having fun
- becoming an activist instead of just a by-stander



Conclusion



The abolitionists of human slavery must have wondered at some point if there is any hope that one day those whom we now call "people of colour" could be treated with equality by the masses, and the suffragettes must have stood in picket lines wondering something similar about women. But look what has happened and is continuing to occur! I hope you found this exercise in realistic and positive thinking to be a soothing, verbally administered brain tonic.

These issues are important not only for your individual well-being, but have a bearing on whether people enter the movement, how effective they are as participants, and how likely they are to stay, especially as actively involved.

Now wait just a minute..! Did I call this document “Coping with Animal Rights Stress”? Let’s rethink that too. True, some stress goes along with being an animal rightist. It is reasonable to suppose that this is an important component of why some people resist animal rights. But it is really the **anti**-animal-rights phenomena that cause stress in this world. If the world were according to animal rights that would only induce feelings of bliss!

Think well, feel well, and be well!

Peace be with you.



Thank you for reading this document. I hope you found it to be helpful. If so, please do not hesitate to pass it on. Thanks again!

Be the change you wish to see in the world.
M. K. Gandhi