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# Proof Positive Exercise

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**Purpose: To provide a visual representation of evidence supporting alternative thoughts.**

Description: A standard technique in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is to amass evidence that supports or refutes a particular belief (cognition). This is especially useful for challenging cognitive distortions (e.g., all-or-none thinking, catastrophizing, or fortune-telling). The therapist can help the client identify a more accurate, alternative thought. The evidence will better support this more helpful alternative thought. To adapt this CBT technique for children who may find it difficult to work only verbally, this exercise uses markers or “chips” to visually represent pieces of evidence. The chips are placed on top of a sheet of paper corresponding to the thought that is supported by the evidence.

**Materials: Small sheets of paper; approximately 20 small items that can serve as chips (e.g., checkers).**

**Case Example: A 9-year old girl shows black-or-white thinking and labeling (“I am smart” vs. “I am stupid.”). Every time she makes a mistake in her schoolwork, she interprets it as evidence for the belief “I am stupid.” An alternative thought was identified to more accurately interpret this evidence: “I made a mistake. I can make mistakes and still be smart.”**

The steps below specifically describe how the Proof Positive exercise was applied to the Case Example of black-or-white/labeling thinking. The steps can be adapted as needed for other cognitive distortions.

STEP 1: Identify the black-and-white/labeling thoughts. One is “I am stupid” the other is “I am smart.” Write down the thoughts and a separate sheet of paper.

STEP 2: Identify alternative thoughts that are more accurate or more helpful: “I made a mistake. I can make mistakes and still be smart.” Write the alternative thought(s) on a separate piece of paper.

STEP 3: Arrange all of the sheets of paper in front of the client and place the pile of “chips” near the client.

STEP 4: Explain: “We have written down your different thoughts on this paper. We want to know if these thoughts are really true. So we are going to look now for proof—every time we find something that makes one of these thoughts more likely to be true, I will give you a chip to put on top of the right piece of paper.”

STEP 5: For every instance in which the client demonstrates intellectual achievement (e.g., spells a difficult word) or positive motivation (e.g. at least attempts to spell the word), award a chip; have the client place it on “I am Smart”. Whenever the client makes a serious mistake, have him/her place a chip on “I made a mistake...” There should be no chips on “I am stupid”—failure can be reinterpreted as simply making a mistake, which is something that can be tolerated.

STEP 6: After several chips have been placed, ask the client which thought is better supported by evidence (i.e., the paper with more chips on it). Review client’s progress in challenging the cognitive distortion.

