THE CARES RESTORATIVE THOUGHT LADDER

Moving from threat-based thinking to growth-centered repair

Adapted from Dr. Frida Rundell's Relational Care Ladder.

Your thought patterns can change when you experience the care and support you need. These four movements align with the Relational Care Ladder.

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TRANSFORM THE THOUGHT

Challenge / Empowerment

This is where resilience, empowerment, and wisdom live. Move from surviving the mistake to learning from it, repairing what you can, and becoming more capable because of it.

3

ENGAGE THE THOUGHT

Engagement / Feelings

This is where dialectical thinking and repair begin. Hold two truths: "I messed up, and I can still grow." Let emotional honesty become relational responsibility.

2

HUMANIZE THE THOUGHT

Nurture / Awareness

This is where guilt, reframing, and perspective begin. Learn to separate your identity from your behavior: "I did something wrong" does not have to become "I am wrong."

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STABILIZE THE THOUGHT

Structure / Safety

This is where you address shame, blame, low self-efficacy, and catastrophizing. The goal is not correction yet. Focus on regulation, emotional safety, and enough structure to pause.

Read from the bottom upward. Move at your own pace. You may need to revisit safety or awareness before engaging in challenge and growth.

Relational Care: where your thought belongs

Notice how these thoughts may show up for you. The supportive phrases invite reflection; they are not diagnoses or prescribed scripts.

STABILIZE THE THOUGHT

RELATIONAL CARE: STRUCTURE / SAFETY

Begin with emotional safety and enough stability to pause. You do not need to rush to correct, confront, or reinterpret your thoughts.

THOUGHT PATTERN	INTERNAL EXAMPLE	SUPPORTIVE PHRASING
Shame	"I am a terrible person."	"What happened matters, but this moment does not define who you are."
Blame	"This is entirely their fault."	"You can name what happened before deciding how to respond."
Low self-efficacy	"I can't handle this."	"What is one small thing that would help you feel more steady right now?"
Catastrophizing	"Everything is ruined."	"What do you know for certain, and what needs attention right now?"

HUMANIZE THE THOUGHT

RELATIONAL CARE: NURTURE / AWARENESS

Make room for your dignity and perspective. Separate your worth from your behavior while making room for responsibility.

THOUGHT PATTERN	INTERNAL EXAMPLE	SUPPORTIVE PHRASING
Guilt	"I feel bad about what I did."	"Feeling regret can guide what you choose to do next."
Identity vs. behavior	"Because I failed, I am a failure."	"A choice or mistake is part of your story, not all of who you are."
Reframing	"There is nothing good to see here."	"Could there be another way to understand part of this experience?"
Perspective	"I already know what everyone thinks."	"What might you still need to understand about their experience?"

From understanding to growth-centered repair

Respond according to your readiness. These phrases invite reflection; they do not replace professional guidance or trained restorative facilitation.

ENGAGE THE THOUGHT

RELATIONAL CARE: ENGAGEMENT / FEELINGS

Make room for your emotional honesty and an honest look at impact. You do not need to rush disclosure or force repair.

THOUGHT PATTERN	INTERNAL EXAMPLE	SUPPORTIVE PHRASING
Dialectical thinking	"I messed up, so I cannot grow."	"Can both be true: you made a mistake, and you can still grow?"
Repair	"The damage is done; nothing can change."	"What part of the harm might you be able to acknowledge or repair?"
Emotional honesty	"I should pretend I'm fine."	"What feelings are present as you consider what happened?"
Relational responsibility	"It only affected me."	"Who else may have been impacted, and what might they need?"

TRANSFORM THE THOUGHT

RELATIONAL CARE: CHALLENGE / EMPOWERMENT

Choose responses aligned with your values and what you are learning. You do not have to recover instantly to grow.

THOUGHT PATTERN	INTERNAL EXAMPLE	SUPPORTIVE PHRASING
Resilience	"I will never recover from this."	"What has helped you navigate hard things before?"
Empowerment	"I have no choices."	"Which next step is within your influence or agency?"
Wisdom	"I have learned nothing."	"What do you understand now that you did not understand then?"
Growth and repair	"I just want to forget it."	"What can you learn, and what repair is realistic and appropriate?"