

Negative Automatic Thoughts

The Problem

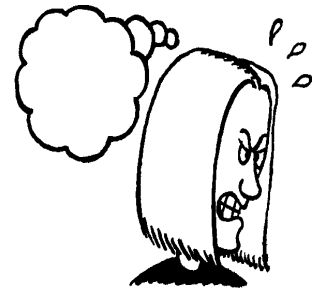


People who are depressed tend to think about themselves, the world and the future in a negative way.

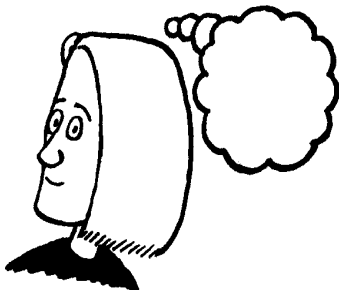
These negative thoughts are:

AUTOMATIC	They just seem to come into your mind without any effort.
DISTORTED	They are not always supported by the things you know to be true.
UNHELPFUL	They keep you feeling depressed, and make it difficult to change.
PLAUSIBLE	You accept them as facts and do not question them.
INVOLUNTARY	You do not choose to have them and they are very difficult to stop.

As these thoughts are negative ones, and seem to come without any effort and automatically, we call them **NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS**. The more depressed you become, the more of these types of negative thoughts you have, and the more you believe them. This type of thinking forms what we call a vicious circle; the more negative thoughts you have, the more you believe them, and the more depressed you become. The best way to help reduce these depressed feelings, is to break this vicious circle.



Overcoming the Problem.



Our aim is to help you learn to recognize when you are thinking negatively, to look for more positive and realistic ways of viewing your experiences, and then to test these out in action. At first this will probably be hard. Answering your negative thoughts is like any other skill, it takes time, effort and practice to get it right. The next few pages will provide you with a guide to help you challenge your negative automatic thoughts.

Step 1: Becoming aware of negative thoughts.

First of all, you need to become aware of what your negative thoughts are, and how they affect you. Negative thoughts can make us feel; anxious, sad, depressed, hopeless, guilty, and angry. We can use these emotions as cues to identify our negative thoughts. Try and notice **when** your mood changes, and think about what was running through your mind at that moment. Doing this will help you become more aware of changes in the way you are feeling and help you to identify the thoughts that are underlying these feelings.



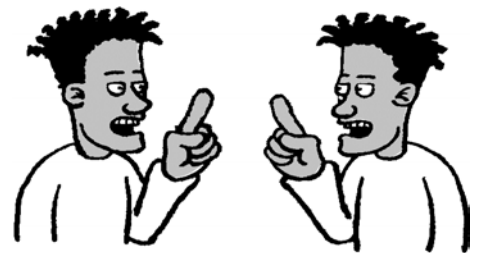
The best way to do this is to write them down as soon as they occur, you can do this using the Negative Thoughts Diary attached to this handout. Try to record the thoughts that were running through your head as accurately as you can.

Sometimes people find it difficult to write down their negative thoughts, because they do not want to face the thoughts, or might be frightened, or even think they are stupid. It is important to remember that ignoring the thoughts won't make them go away.

Step 2: Answering Negative Thoughts

Once you have learned to become aware of your negative thoughts, the next stage is to try and answer the thoughts back and find more realistic and helpful alternatives.

There are four questions you can use to help you answer your negative thoughts back.



1. What is the evidence for your thought? Do the facts of the situation back up what you think?
2. What alternative reasons could there be for what has happened? Try and think of as many alternative explanations as you can and look at the evidence for and against them.
3. What is the effect of thinking in the way you do?
4. What are the thinking errors you are making? People who feel depressed tend to jump to the conclusion that things are bad, and they end up feeling guilty and taking responsibility for things that aren't their fault.

Use your Negative Thoughts Diary to write down as many answers to your negative thoughts as you can.

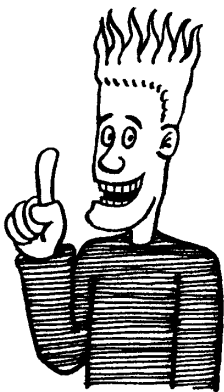


If you have managed to answer your negative thoughts in a more positive way, you should find that your belief in the negative thought has decreased. Be aware of "Yes, but..." and challenge these thoughts in the same way. Don't expect your beliefs in the negative thoughts to disappear completely in one go.

To learn to answer your negative thoughts well, you will need to take time and practice regularly. If you are feeling very upset when you fill in your Negative Thoughts Diary, you may want to wait until you have calmed down before looking for some ways to answer your thoughts back. Don't forget, Don't put yourself down, and don't set yourself perfectionist standards, as this will only make answering your thoughts back harder.

Twenty Questions to Help You Challenge Your Negative Thinking

1. Am I confusing a thought with a fact?
2. Am I jumping to conclusions?
3. Am I assuming my view of things is the only one possible?
4. Do negative thoughts help or hinder me?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking this way?



6. Am I asking questions that have no answers?
7. Am I thinking in all or nothing terms?
8. Am I using ultimatum words in my thinking?
9. Am I telling myself I'm a bad person because of things that have happened recently?
10. Am I concentrating on my weaknesses and forgetting my strengths?

11. Am I blaming myself for something that is not really my fault?
12. Am I taking things personally?
13. Am I expecting myself to be perfect?
14. Am I using a double standard?

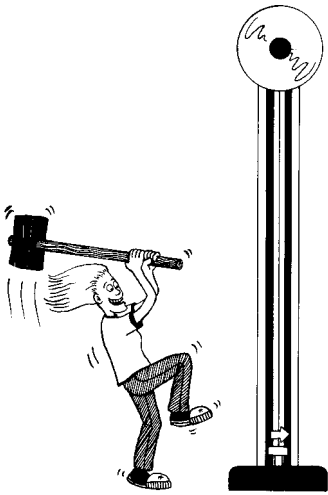


15. Am I only paying attention to the black side of things?
16. Am I overestimating the chance of disaster?
17. Am I exaggerating the importance of events?
18. Am I worrying about the way the way things ought to be rather than dealing with them as they are?
19. Am I assuming I can do nothing to change my situation?
20. Am I predicting the future?

Action

Arguing against your negative automatic thoughts may not be enough by itself to convince you that they are incorrect. You will need to do things to help prove to yourself that your negative thoughts are wrong. The best way to do this is to act on your rational answers to prove to yourself whether your negative thoughts are true or false. Actions will help you to break old habits in the way you think and strengthen your new positive way of thinking.

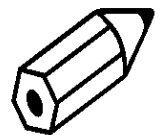
Testing out your predictions



People are like scientists. We make predictions, and then we act on them (e.g. "If I stand in the rain I'll get cold and wet"; "If I press the bell, the bus will stop"). We use information from our experiences to either confirm our predictions, or to change them. A depressed person is like a scientist gone wrong. He or she distorts their experiences to fit their negative beliefs, rather than using it to prove or change predictions. Many of our negative thoughts take the form of predictions (e.g. "I won't be able to cope"; "Everyone will hate me"; "If I say what I think everyone will reject me".) When you question these thoughts or predictions, review the evidence for and against them, look for alternatives and take action to test

them out, you are like a scientist running an experiment to examine a new theory. The following points are the steps you need to take to test out your predictions:

1. State your **prediction** or **negative thought** clearly.
2. Review the **existing evidence** for and against it.
3. Decide on a plan of action which will help you test the truth of your prediction, like doing an experiment.
4. Write the results down:
 - a) If your prediction or negative thought is shown to be false, then action has shown you a positive alternative what you were originally thinking.
 - b) If your prediction or negative thought is shown to be true, do not worry. This is also valuable information, and you can think about what you were doing to bring about that result. You can then try and work out a way of acting or thinking differently in the future to try and bring about a more positive result. Once you have done this, set up another experiment to challenge your prediction or negative thought.
5. Think about what conclusions you can draw from your results.



The following page contains an example of how you might challenge your negative thought.

Example: Peter, A Level Student

In class Peter never asks questions, because he is frightened he will look stupid.

1. Prediction

"If I ask questions people will think I am stupid"

2. Review of the evidence

If I was stupid, I wouldn't be in this class in the first place.
Ignorance is not the same as stupidity, at this stage in the course there are bound to be many things I don't yet know.
I don't think other people are stupid because they ask questions.
I have no evidence that other people think I'm stupid, in fact the teacher encourages questions.
Asking questions is a good way to learn.

3. Experiment 1

Over the next weeks, observe what questions are asked and what reactions they get from people.

4. Results

Lots of questions asked and no bad reactions that I could see.
Several questions led to stimulating discussions.
Teacher actually said that one question was good, and I was thinking of that question. If only I had the nerve to ask it.
Jim asked a couple of questions with obvious answers, but it wasn't a disaster, everyone laughed including him.

5. Conclusion

On the evidence, no-one is likely to think me stupid for asking questions.
Even if a question was stupid, it need not be a disaster - It does not mean that I am stupid.

6. Experiment 2

Ask a question in class next week.
Prepare for it by reviewing what I have done here.