

## Coping With Negative Thinking

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Many psychological problems can be traced to negative thinking. When persons are stressed, it is not always as a result of situations that happen to them. Many times people generate their own stress through pessimistic thinking. And there are times that small stresses are made into major ones by negative thoughts. Negative thinking can be triggered by almost any type of circumstance and is usually involved in depression, anxiety, anger, and relationship problems. Whether persons experience a situation as stressful or merely as a challenge depends on how they size it up in comparison with their own ability to deal with it.

Sometimes negative thoughts are clear and obvious. At other times, they are somewhat hidden, even while they are causing upsetting emotions. For example, if a person has a difficult test coming up and feels anxious, they may have a clear, negative thought that they are likely to fail and are going to be kicked out of school. If a person has a fear of flying, they may have a clear picture of the plane crashing. If they are depressed, their negative thoughts may have to do more with ideas that they are bad and worthless. On the other hand, a student may be only vaguely aware that he is worried about not doing as well as his brother. This thought may be more hidden. Oftentimes, the first step in dealing with negative thinking is just to become aware of exactly what it is that is going through your mind.

When negative thoughts occur in stressful situations, anxious or depressing thoughts are likely to relate to the specific incident at first. However, once a strong feeling state occurs (such as depression, anxiety, or anger), negative thoughts may spontaneously start to develop about a wide variety of issues unrelated to the triggering event. At that point, negative thoughts may seem to take on a life of their own. It doesn't take any effort for them to occur. They seem to pop up automatically. One client called these "popcorn thoughts" because of the way they seemed to just keep "popping up." Another name for them is automatic negative thoughts. Notice that the first letters of the words in this phrase create the word "ANTS". This is an apt description of automatic negative thoughts. They swarm like ants at a picnic. Any one ant sting is not so bad, but the combination of many stings is very painful. In the same way, any one negative thought may be tolerable, but the combined effect of many negative thoughts can be very distressing.

Negative thoughts are especially likely to occur when persons are by themselves, in boring situations, or doing something that takes no effortful thinking (when the mind is in "neutral" so to speak). Automatic negative thoughts seem absolutely realistic and true, but most of the time they are not. In times of emotional upset, these thoughts are often distorted and excessively negative. And the longer they are dwelled on, the more upset the person is likely to become.

It is important that any distorted automatic negative thoughts not be allowed to swarm and create psychological havoc. Rather, they need to be confronted as being illogical. Simply avoiding

them is not a useful strategy. On the other hand, neither is it useful to always do battle with them. This is a guerilla warfare strategy of confronting a powerful enemy when it is advantageous, and withdrawing at other times. Similarly, if a person's depressive or anxiety provoking thoughts are overwhelming, it is important to challenge them when the person is feeling at their strongest (usually some time during the daylight hours). In the middle of the night, when some persons feel most vulnerable, it may be better to use other strategies such as thought stopping.

As you read through this booklet, you may become aware of automatic negative thoughts such as "I can't learn anything" or "Everybody else must be able to remember more than me." Or perhaps your thought might be, "I should have known this already." Remember that if you are depressed or stressed, your memory and concentration may well be impaired. It is not important to learn the information fast. Just focus on understanding it. Or on the other hand, your thought may be, "This isn't going to help me." This, too, could be an automatic negative thought. Such skepticism is fine, as long as you can also be skeptical of your own negative thoughts.

### **Learning to Recognize Types of Illogical Thinking**

Most automatic negative thoughts in depression and anxiety are unrealistic. It is important to realize that thoughts are not the same thing as reality. This is sometimes hard to accept. Human beings value their intelligence and their ability to think through problems. But most of the time, when they are upset by a situation, it is not the actual situation itself but their appraisal of the situation that is upsetting to them. There are some situations that are truly upsetting in themselves--for example, when someone is injured or dies. But there are other situations where the amount of upset that is felt is almost totally a result of how the person thinks about the situation. For example, if someone is pushed into a swimming pool at an informal summer party, they may be depressed if they think they are being made fun of. They may be fearful if they think they may drown. They may be pleased if they think they are the life of the party and getting a lot of attention. They may be angry if they tell themselves that the others are bad people for doing what they have done. People react to their perception of the situation as much as they react to the situation itself. Another way of saying this is that they are reacting to the social reality of the situation and not just the physical reality. But the social reality takes thought and interpretation. The social reality is not always obvious, and even after an event is long over, people may disagree about what "actually happened" and why it happened.

Thus, as part of the coping process it is important to remember that negative thoughts are just that--thoughts. They are only guesses at the meaning of the situation. A person may believe one thing one day and then change their mind about that "fact" the next day. Reality has probably not changed, but their way of thinking about it has.

In depression and anxiety, people tend to think in ways that exaggerate or otherwise distort situations. This is not done on purpose. It results from their strong emotions and from certain habitual ways of thinking. Depressed persons do not want to think negatively, but their brains tend to anyway. It is not clear why this is so. But it is important for depressed people not to

deepen their depression by further blaming themselves for their illogical thinking. In the past, some misguided mental health professionals thought that depressed people actually wanted to think negatively and be depressed. However, that is not the case. It is actually more like the situation of driving a car down the highway with the front end out of alignment. In such a situation, a car tends to drive off the road. It is not the drivers that is steering it off the road. In fact, the driver must constantly compensate by turning the steering wheel in the opposite direction. In the same way, in depression and anxiety, the brain will keep generating negative thoughts for which the person has to compensate.

### **Specific Types of Illogical Thinking**

Here are some of the most typical types of negative thoughts that a person may have. By learning these and being able to recognize them when they occur, an individual can begin to gain some control over their thinking.

**1. *Ignoring the positive; focusing on the negative.*** In this distortion the person ignores all the positive events that are happening (or have happened) but focuses primarily on the negative. They may concentrate on their own negative personal qualities or on negative experiences while ignoring their positive characteristics and experiences. For example, a person may realistically recognize that their boss was not pleased with part of their work. At the same time they may not remember that this is the same boss who has recently given them a raise and praised their performance. Another example would be a mother who has had a hard time being nurturing to her children for several days. She has been overworked, tired, or depressed. Her thought might be that she is just a cranky, nagging mother rather than a helpful, nurturing one. This might overlook the many positive things she has done as a mother: cooking good meals, taking them to the zoo in the past, helping them with problems, and so on.

On the lines below, write in your own examples of how you may have ignored the positive and focused on the negative. By listing examples here, it will help you to be more aware of this tendency in the future.

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**2. *Disqualifying the positive.*** Disqualifying the positive involves taking a compliment or an accomplishment and rejecting it out loud or silently before it can start to have a positive effect.

It is a normal human tendency to eventually begin to take positive things for granted. Positive events start to seem commonplace, and they don't produce the same feelings as they once did. So after making generally good grades, getting another good grade on a test might seem unimportant

and not very exciting. The person simply has a “so what?” attitude. So what if I made a good grade? So what if someone said I look nice? However, the effect of this tendency is to reduce some of the pleasure in life. It is important that as much as possible, people continue to appreciate their own positive qualities, what they are accomplishing, and any positive events in their lives.

A more active way of disqualifying the positive involves purposely saying something to negate the positive event or quality. For example, "I know that this person told me I look good today, but they are my friend, and they are just trying to cheer me up. They don't really mean it." It probably takes a few seconds for a compliment to have a positive effect on a person. Therefore this behavior intercepts the thought and negates it. As a result, the person cannot enjoy the gift that has been given to them. In this regard it is useful to remember the line from the musical Auntie Mame, “Life is a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death.” How can it be that when surrounded by friends, accomplishments, and compliments, some people are still “starving to death” for good feelings about themselves? One reason can be that they have learned to disqualify the positive. They have learned how to nullify the effects of the positive things around them.

Write down some examples of how you have disqualified accomplishments, positive events, or compliments. If you can't think of times that you disqualified these, then simply write down positive characteristics about yourself and positive accomplishments. How do you feel as you write these down? Do you feel any tendency to play down your positive qualities?

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**3. Overgeneralizing.** When a person is strongly emotional, they tend to use emphatic statements in talking with others and in their own thinking. A typical statement from a depressed person is, "I can't do anything right". (Or in a marital argument, it might be “You never do anything right.”) These statements increase negative emotions by using the overgeneralizing words “anything” and “never.” Such statements not only inflame negative feelings, they are almost never true. Overgeneralizing words tends to ignore the positive and overly accentuate the negative. They have never done anything right? Statements that use the words "anything," "nothing," "always", "never", "ever", "everyone", "no one," etc., are very likely to be overgeneralizations. When used by a person with low self-esteem, overgeneralizations are usually self put-downs, such as "No one likes me." Suppose a person, who on the way to see their therapist, gets a speeding ticket. An overgeneralizing thought might be, "Every time I try to help myself, something goes wrong." This would be taking a single, aggravating situation and overgeneralizing so that a pervasive sense of hopelessness and helplessness might result.

Write down examples of thoughts you might have had that involve overgeneralization.

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## Points to Ponder

*"All generalizations are dangerous, even this one."*

*Alexandre Dumas*

**4. Exaggerating and Catastrophizing.** Exaggeration involves mentally magnifying an event. An example of exaggeration would be getting a minor criticism from one's boss and then thinking, "He really chewed me out." Exaggeration often involve pictures in the mind instead of just words. If a hail storm causes a few minor dents in the car, a person might see it in their mind as huge obvious impressions. They might then be surprised when they come back and see that they were only minor dents after all.

Catastrophizing involves an extreme way of thinking about an event and extreme fears about what the consequences of the event could be. Catastrophizing can go far beyond simple exaggeration. It can link together one imagined event to another until in the person's mind a true catastrophe seems to result. Here would be an example of catastrophizing. It may seem somewhat amusing, but it is not unusual for some depressed and anxious persons. In this example, the person has heard that there may be layoffs at their work. They start thinking:

I'm going to be laid off.  
I won't be able to find another job.  
I will lose my house.  
My wife will become disgusted with me.  
She'll leave me.  
I'll be all alone.  
I won't be able to cope.  
I'll start drinking again.  
I'll end up a drunk in the gutter, all alone.  
And then I'll die.

This is clearly an extreme example, but when a person is in the grip of depression and anxiety,

the mind can leap from one worst case scenario to the next, until there is no where else left to go.

Write down some examples of exaggerating and catastrophizing in which you have engaged.

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**5. "Should" statements.** Thoughts which use the words "should" and "ought" tend to produce guilt and anger. If they are directed towards the self, the resulting feelings tend to be guilt and inadequacy. If they are directed towards others, then the result tends to be anger at the other person or persons.

For example, if a student thinks, "I shouldn't have made a B on that test; I should have made an A," then they are likely to have feelings of inadequacy or guilt. On the other hand, if a person takes a parking place that we wanted, we may think, "How inconsiderate. They shouldn't have done that. They should have seen that I was going to park there." This would be more likely to produce feelings of anger.

"Should" thoughts make each decision or action into a moral issue. The person is telling themselves that whatever happened was terrible and awful. The implication is that it went beyond being inconvenient or undesirable--it was simply a "bad" thing for the other person to do. Now, it is true that there are moral issues in life. For example, killing and stealing are moral issues, and it would be appropriate to use the words "should" and "shouldn't" when discussing behaviors such as these. On the other hand, a stressed mother might find herself very tired coming home after work. It is all she can do to microwave some hot dogs and serve some chips and pop to her children. Her thought might be, "I'm a terrible mother. I should cook a better meal. I should feed my children better." While it is true that in the long run repeated meals of this type will not be good for her children, what she feeds them on any one night is not going to ruin their health and does not make her a bad mother. However, by using the word "should" she is making the cooking (or lack of it) into a moral issue. She is saying that she is a bad person. As a result, she is likely to feel guilty and/or inadequate. She may even feel depressed as a result. This type of negative thinking and the feelings that result from it are likely to deplete her energy and thus make it even more unlikely that she will be able to prepare good meals and attend to the housework which needs to be performed. It is important to keep moral issues as moral issues and non-moral issues as non-moral issues.

A psychiatrist by the name of Karen Horney once wrote about the "tyranny of the should." Here is her description of this problem:

[The person with this belief system may think that he] “should be the utmost of honesty, generosity, considerateness, justice, dignity, courage, unselfishness. He should be the perfect lover, husband, teacher. He should be able to endure everything, should like everybody, should love his parents, his wife, his country; or, he should not be attached to anything or anybody, nothing should matter to him, he should never feel hurt, and he should always be serene and unruffled. He should always enjoy life; or, he should be above pleasure and enjoyment. He should be spontaneous; he should always control his feelings. He should know, understand, and foresee everything. He should be able to solve every problem of his own, or of others, in no time. He should be able to overcome every difficulty of his as soon as he sees it. He should never be tired or fall ill. He should always be able to find a job. He should be able to do things in one hour which can only be done in two to three hours.

Now, write down for yourself any of the “shoulds” and “shouldn’ts” which you tend to use against yourself or others. Are any of them true moral issues?

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**6. *All or nothing thinking.*** Life consists of many degrees of failure and success. We are not all pure successes or pure failures--in fact, no one is. But some individuals lose sight of this fact. Some persons set extremely high goals for themselves and act as if anything short of these goals is just mediocrity and failure. For example some persons conclude from a small failure that they are a total failure, or they may conclude after losing their temper with their children that they are a terrible parent. They seem to act as if there is no gray area in between total success and total failure, total adequacy and total ineptness. This is "all or nothing" thinking. It ignores the fact that for 99.9% of us, we are not the best or the worst at what we do but somewhere in between. We can make mistakes and still be good at our job, at parenting, and so on, even if we aren't perfect at those tasks. This type of thinking can be applied to other people and situations as well as to oneself, causing upset with others.

A person with all or nothing thinking is like a person who is standing on top of a ladder with all of the middle rungs removed. If they take one misstep, it is a long way down to the ground. In the situation they have put themselves in, either they are on top of the ladder, or they are going to crash to the bottom. Everyone takes a misstep in life at times. Persons need to have in their minds some concept of the middle rungs, that is the middle ground in life where one is not a total success or total failure but can still be quite competent.

Write down any examples of all or nothing thinking which you may have engaged in from time to time:

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**7. Mindreading.** Mindreading is a form of jumping to conclusions. Specifically, mindreading is "knowing" what another person is thinking without adequate evidence. Human beings tend to depend on their intuition a great deal, and part of intuition is being able to read other people's faces and behavior--to "read between the lines" so to speak. But this also causes trouble--especially when persons are depressed or anxious. At that point, they are more likely to misread people. As a rule of thumb, it is best NOT to depend on intuition when depressed or anxious. During times of high emotionality, it is generally best to base conclusions and behavior on hard facts.

A woman who is depressed and has low self esteem might have the mindreading thought, "When I walked in the room I felt the men looked at me and thought I was ugly." In this example, the thought involve worrying that other people do not approve of her. This thought is likely to deepen her feelings of inadequacy. It may also create angry feelings in her for the same reason.

Persons who are not very verbal or who do not routinely communicate their thoughts and feelings are inadvertently likely to encourage mind reading in others. Mindreading is also likely to occur with individuals who are especially important in some way. Bosses, supervisors, principals, and administrators are individuals who have power but who may not often share their thoughts and opinions. As a result, individuals are likely to try to guess what they are thinking and feeling. Spouses are also prone to mindreading; they believe they know each other so well that they can surmise what each other's thoughts are. Guesses start to feel like certainties. The best way to counteract this problem is to ask for feedback and check out assumptions.

Write down several examples of mind reading which you have done:

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**8. Fortune telling.** Like mind reading, fortune telling is a type of jumping to conclusions. However, rather than assuming what people are thinking, it jumps to conclusions about what will happen in the future. Going to a job interview, a person might be absolutely convinced they will not get the job. Or another person might be sure that his wife will leave him. If there is a lack of hard evidence, these kinds of beliefs could be false and very damaging.

When people are anxious or depressed, fortune telling thoughts can feel very convincing. They can seem absolutely true. But just because they appear true doesn't make them so.

Unfortunately most people are not good fortune tellers, and the more depressed or anxious they become, the more off the mark their thoughts become as well.



## Points to Ponder

*Perhaps if you find you are a good fortune teller, you need to go into the business. If you are not good at it, maybe you need to quit torturing yourself with these kinds of thoughts.*

Fortune telling thoughts can sometimes become self-fulfilling prophecies. That is, believing in them can sometimes make them come true. If a person's thought is that they will go to a party, but no one will be friendly to them, then they may act in such a dejected, distant manner that people do stay away from them. Or if a person goes to a job interview with the belief that they will not get the job, then you they come across so dispirited and unmotivated that the employer will not want to offer the job to them.

The best way to combat fortune telling thoughts is to test them out--to decide to follow up on each thought and see if it comes true. Oftentimes, after a crisis is over, a person breathes a sigh of relief and then goes on. They don't really pay attention to how off target their negative thoughts might have been. But it is exactly by paying attention and remembering that you have been wrong before that makes it easier to challenge these negative fortune telling thoughts when they occur again.

Write down any examples of fortune telling that you can remember and note whether they came true. It is likely to be very difficult for you to accurately recall thoughts and outcomes from the past. It will be important to keep an ongoing record in order to know accurately just how valid these thoughts tend to be.

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**9. Reverse Fortune Telling.** At times, people become involved in "what if" thoughts and "if only" thoughts.

"If only I had disciplined my children differently, they would have turned out better."

"If only I had been nicer to my husband, he wouldn't have left me."

“If only I had chosen a different career, I would be wealthier and happier.”

Reverse fortune telling involves jumping to conclusions about what the present would be like if we had acted differently in the past. The popular name for this is “Monday morning quarterbacking.” We might also call this the “I should have had eyes in the back of the head syndrome.” The person is essentially saying to themselves: "I should have seen this coming. I should have known this was going to happen, etc." But why should people be able to foresee everything accurately? There is no way for people to know the future and no reason to blame themselves for not always making the correct decision.

Another problem with reverse fortune telling is that it is usually not testable. These statements often cannot be determined to be true or false. For example, the woman thinking that her husband wouldn't have left her if she had been nicer to him probably would have no way of testing this out. There is no way to go back and see what would have happened. There is no way for a person to know if they would have been happier if they had taken a different job. There are only a few types of reverse fortune telling that are testable, such as “if only I had bought Microsoft stock in 1980, I would be wealthier today.” But most of these thoughts are not testable, and because they are not, they are “nonsensical.” They are no more true or false than saying that on the other side of the universe is a pot of gold. It might be true or it might be false; the person will never know. And since they will never know, it is a useless thought that drains away their psychological energy that could be better used for productive types of coping.

Write down any examples of reverse fortune telling thoughts you have had:

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**10. *Emotional reasoning.*** This type of negative thinking involves basing thoughts on feelings rather than the other way around. It is more logical to base feelings on thoughts rather than thoughts on feelings. In anxiety and depression, persons have strong intuitive feelings which lead them to negative conclusions. In fact, even their words often reveal emotional reasoning. They will say “I feel like he doesn't like me” or “I feel like there is nothing I can do.” Feelings are emotional states which can generally be expressed in one word, such as “scared,” “discouraged,” “rejected,” and so on. Intuitive reasoning (emotional reasoning) is dangerous in depression or anxiety. It will tell a person all sorts of things that are not true. Feelings of anxiety can be so gripping that it is hard to believe that there isn't some type danger lurking, some disaster ready to happen. In fact, that is the purpose of anxiety--to alert people to danger and then to keep them alert. But anxiety will often lead people astray. In depression, a person may “feel” worthless or “feel” helpless. But that does not mean that he or she is actually worthless or helpless. These are conclusions based on feelings and nothing more.

Write down any of the thoughts which you have had that involved emotional reasoning.

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**11. *Personalization.*** Individuals may view situations as pertaining to them which in reality has nothing to do with them. This often occurs in depression and social anxiety. A person may have low self-esteem and feel unimportant and yet paradoxically tend to view all sorts of negative events as revolving around them. If a wife seems distant; if a boss is angry about something; or if a boyfriend doesn't call--any of these may be seen as caused by or aimed at the person. So, for example, if your boss is not particularly friendly one morning, a person with negative thinking might assume that the boss is angry at them personally. In fact, the boss may have a hundred other things on her mind, from trying to balance the departmental budget to dealing with an IRS audit. But these are things which the employee would have no way of knowing. Here's another example. A teacher walks into a break room, and the other teachers momentarily stop talking. They look at her and then resume talking. The teacher concludes that they must have been talking about her and therefore had to stop when she came in. Another possibility, however, is that it is only natural for people to stop talking when someone walks into a room. It doesn't mean that they are saying negative things about the person. When an individual assumes that they are the cause or the object of negative events, then they are personalizing.

Of course, sometimes events do relate to us. Not every negative thought is an automatic negative thought. The issue here is whether there is any evidence for such negative conclusions. Is there solid data that these events occurred because of us? Without taking time to look at the evidence in an objective manner, the imagination can spin out of control.

Write down any examples of your thoughts that have involved personalization.

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**12. *Mislabeling.***

In mislabeling, the person tends to label events and behavior in the worst possible way. If they are having difficulty getting motivated, they may blame themselves for being "lazy." If they are having difficulty paying attention, thinking clearly, or remembering, they may tell themselves that they are "stupid." By mislabeling behavior, a person with low self-esteem or depression is

likely to feel even more inadequate. It would be more accurate to think, "I'm really having difficulty keeping my mind focused," or "I'm having a hard time motivating myself to study today."

Why do people use these powerful self put downs? Some individuals are merely repeating what has been said to them by parents, teachers, etc. For others, it is due to depression which tends to direct their thinking towards the most negative thoughts possible. Do you tend to do this? What would be some examples of this in your thinking?

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## Time for Practice

### *Recognizing Types of Illogical Thoughts*

*Label each of the following automatic negative thoughts by the type of distortion involved.*

1. *I am a total failure.* \_\_\_\_\_
2. *Something terrible is going to happen. I can feel it.* \_\_\_\_\_
3. *I will never get well from my depression.* \_\_\_\_\_
4. *All the other college students think I am stupid.* \_\_\_\_\_
5. *My grandmother died, and I feel sad.* \_\_\_\_\_
6. *I shouldn't get angry at my mother.* \_\_\_\_\_
7. *I have never succeeded in anything.* \_\_\_\_\_
8. *Everybody in my family thinks that I'm a terrible mother.* \_\_\_\_\_
9. *Client: When that other person sat down at the table, there was no room left for me. They were making sure I didn't sit with them.*  
*Doctor: Is there any other way of seeing the situation? Maybe they didn't know you wanted to sit there?*  
*Client: I'm sure they just didn't want me there. They don't like me.* \_\_\_\_\_
10. *I haven't felt like doing anything. I guess I'm just lazy.* \_\_\_\_\_
11. *I haven't been able to think clearly. I'm just dumb.* \_\_\_\_\_
12. *I forgot my lines in the play and really made a fool of myself.* \_\_\_\_\_
13. *I know that I got several A's this semester, but I was just lucky.* \_\_\_\_\_
14. *I can't believe that I forgot the name of the boss's wife. Now I'm doomed for sure.* \_\_\_\_\_
15. *I should have invested in bonds rather than stocks this year. I should have seen that drop in the stock market coming.* \_\_\_\_\_
16. *If only I hadn't gone into school teaching, I would be making more money, feeling more professional satisfaction, and feeling much lot happier now.* \_\_\_\_\_

17. *My boss took the project away from my team and gave it to another. He has clearly lost confidence in me.* \_\_\_\_\_
18. *My son acted up at church. Everyone must think I have no control over him and that I'm a terrible parent.* \_\_\_\_\_

***Suggested Answers***

*Here are some suggested answers. However, there may be other possible answers than the ones listed below.*

1. ***Overgeneralization***--“Total failure” overgeneralizes from a single situation.  
***Ignoring the positive***--“Total failure” overlooks the person’s successes.  
***Mislabeling***--Sometimes what a person calls failure is really a temporary setback.  
***All or nothing thinking***--This thought may reflect an attitude of “Either I am a total success or a total failure, and there is nothing in between.”
2. ***Emotional reasoning***--A gut feeling is not good evidence that something bad is going to happen.  
***Fortune telling***--This is predicting the future without good evidence.
3. ***Fortune telling***--There is no way to predict the future and no way of knowing that one will not get well.  
***Emotional reasoning***--A depressed person often “feels like” they are not going to get well, but that isn’t actually evidence. It is only a feeling.
4. ***Mind reading***--There is no way of knowing what everybody thinks.  
***Overgeneralization***-- Even if one person has criticized an individual’s intelligence, it doesn’t mean that everyone sees them that way.
5. ***This is not a distorted thought.*** Sadness and grieving are normal human feelings.
6. ***Should statement***-- this make having a feeling of anger into a moral issue, which in turn causes guilt. Feeling angry is not a problem. Even expressing anger is not a problem. The problem arises in certain types of aggressive expressions of hostility which tear others down--not with the anger itself. For that reason, using the word “should” would be a type of automatic thought.
7. ***Overgeneralization***--It is unlikely that the person hasn’t succeeded in anything  
***Ignoring the positive***--They are probably overlooking some real successes.  
***All or nothing thinking***--This person appears to be thinking that they are either a total success or a total failure.
8. ***Mindreading***--How do the person know what everybody else in the family thinks?  
***Overgeneralizing***--Everybody thinks that? Or just one or two people?
9. ***Mind reading***--The client is reading a motive into the fact that all the chairs were taken. Unless there were other things going on in the situation, this would be vastly overinterpreting the motives of the people at the table.  
***Personalization***--This person is seeing an external situation as aimed at her when

*it might have nothing to do with her.*

10. **Mislabeling**--Just because a person doesn't have motivation or interest in doing something at a particular time doesn't mean that they are lazy.  
**Ignoring the Positive or Disqualifying the Positive**--It is also possible that the person really is accomplishing some things. These may be things which don't seem very important yet are taking time and effort.
11. **Mislabeling**--Again, there is the same problem here. People can have problems with concentration and memory for a lot of different reasons, including anxiety and depression. Thus, problems in these areas can be temporary symptoms rather indicating a lifelong character trait. Such symptoms do not mean that the person is "dumb."
12. **Mislabeling**--They made a "fool" of themselves? Or could it be that there was just an awkward moment.  
**Ignoring the positive**--They may not be taking into account other aspects of their performance.  
**Mind reading**--Perhaps they are assuming that the audience thought they looked foolish.
13. **Disqualifying the positive**--This person is not allowing themselves to feel good about their grades. By attributing the A's to luck, they are disqualifying their own achievement.
14. **Catastrophizing; fortune telling**--Forgetting the name of the boss's wife is not the best idea in the world, but it doesn't usually result in catastrophe.
15. **"Should thought"**--It is illogical to tell yourself that you should have known what was going to happen. In hindsight there might have been indications of a developing problem, but it is not so easy to predict things before they happen. It would be more logical to say, "I wish I had seen that coming," or even "If I had foreseen that, I would have saved a lot of money." But to say, "I should have seen it coming" is a needless exercise in self-punishment.
16. **Reverse fortune telling**--There is no way to know if this is true or not, and there is no sense in torturing yourself.
17. **Personalization**--How does this person know that the change in work assignment was due to him? Maybe it was due to other people on the team. Maybe it was due to circumstances that had nothing to do with him or the team.
18. **Mind reading**--Unless someone has spoken to the parent, they have no way of knowing what others are thinking. Other people might be much more

*understanding than the person realizes if they have had children of their own.*

**Overgeneralization**--*There may be a few church members who do think that the parent has lost control but others who are understanding of how hard it can be to always keep children in line.*



## Points to Ponder

Where do your negative thoughts come from? Do you think that they come from your biology, your childhood, or where? If they come from inside you, do you think that you have the power to choose not to think them? Why or why not?

## Things to Do

*The essential thought distortion--the “granddaddy” of all negative thinking processes--is ignoring the positive and focusing on the negative. On the lines below write down things in your life for which you can be grateful. For some people, this is easy because their lives have been filled with many positive experiences. For other people it is a more difficult task because life has been hard. But almost everyone has some positive events or positive people in their life.*

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*Try going through a whole day looking for positive events. This could include anything from your spouse being kind to you, getting a parking place easily, feeling good for a few moments when you didn't expect to feel good, and so on. Nothing is too small in this exercise to be included.*

*Keep an ongoing gratitude journal in which you record 5 things for which you can be grateful each day.*

## The Four Column Technique--A Method of Combating Negative Thinking

The four column method is a cognitive therapy technique for working on distorted thinking. This approach of challenging thoughts accomplishes two things. First, it helps a person to see clearly how negative moods and upset feelings are caused by negative thinking. Secondly, it provides a straightforward way by which to challenge negative thoughts. By making yourself familiar with the types of negative thinking outlined above, a person can gain greater control over their negative thoughts. When you are able to recognize particular types of negative thinking and to label them, then it is easier to go on and challenge the thoughts successfully.

In the following example, the person is feeling upset because of losing their temper with their children. They start off by writing down the situation that occurred without any interpretation:

| <b>The Objective Situation or Triggering Event</b> | <b>Automatic Negative Thoughts</b> | <b>Negative Consequences<br/>(Painful Emotions,<br/>Physical Symptoms, or<br/>Unhealthy Behavior)</b> | <b>Realistic, Logical Thoughts</b> |
|--|------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| I yelled at the kids and sent them to their rooms. |                                    |   |                                    |

The objective situation column contains no interpretation. It is the actual situation without the addition of any negative thinking. It is how other people would probably view the situation if they were able to observe it. Why is it important to have no interpretation in the first column? Because it is essential to separate hard fact from negative thinking. Sometimes, it is hard to see just how much we are assuming to be true that is not true. Take, for example, the situation in which a person walks into a room, and other people are looking at him and laughing. Being laughed at can be difficult to cope with. However, what is probably happening is that negative thinking is already contaminating the person's thinking. The objective event may be that people are laughing and that he is walking into the room at the same time--a quite different statement of the situation.

Similarly, note that it states in the first column of the example above that the person "yelled at the kids." The word "yell" already contains some degree of interpretation. How loud was their voice? Was it on edge? It might have been more objective to say that the person raised their voice at their children and sent them to their rooms. However, most parents have had some experience yelling at their children (at least once). Therefore, we will assume for the moment that this is an accurate statement of the objective situation.

Now, the person then writes down how that event made them feel:

| <b>Objective Situation<br/>(The “Event”)</b>       | <b>Automatic Negative<br/>Thoughts</b> | <b>Negative<br/>Consequences</b>       | <b>Realistic, Logical<br/>Thoughts</b> |
|--|--|--|--|
| I yelled at the kids and sent them to their rooms. |  | <b>Depressed<br/>Upset<br/>Ashamed</b> |  |

So far, there is nothing new, just a summarizing of what has happened. Now it's time for them to figure out just what their negative thoughts were in the situation. Why did they feel depressed and ashamed? What were their beliefs?

| <b>Objective Situation<br/>(“The Event”)</b>       | <b>Automatic Negative<br/>Thoughts</b>  | <b>Negative<br/>Consequences</b> | <b>Realistic, Logical<br/>Thoughts</b> |
|--|---|----------------------------------|--|
| I yelled at the kids and sent them to their rooms. | <p><b>I'm turning out to be just like my mother, and I hated her.</b></p> <p><b>I'm a terrible mother.</b></p> <p><b>My kids will hate me.</b></p> <p><b>When they grow up, they won't have anything to do with me. They will remember me as a shrew.</b></p> | Depressed<br>Upset<br>Ashamed    |  |

Now it is clear how the person became depressed. What was the bridge between the situation and the depressive feelings? It was the person's thoughts about her mother, how she was becoming like her mother, and how her children would feel about her in the future. There may be other negative thoughts as well. But when there are many negative thoughts, it is often useful to boil them down to the two or three most important ones at first. It can be overwhelming and demoralizing to come up with two to three pages of negative thoughts.

There are several automatic negative thoughts to challenge here. She begins with the first one:

| <b>Objective Situation<br/>(The "Event")</b>              | <b>Automatic Negative Thoughts</b>  | <b>Negative Consequences</b>           | <b>Realistic, Logical Thoughts</b>   |
|---|---|--|--|
| <p>I yelled at the kids and sent them to their rooms.</p> | <p>I'm turning out to be just like my mother, and I hated her.</p> <p>I'm a terrible mother.</p> <p>My kids will hate me.</p> <p>When they grow up, they won't have anything to do with me. They will remember me as a terrible mother.</p> | <p>Depressed<br/>Upset<br/>Ashamed</p> | <p><b>I'm overgeneralizing or using all or nothing thinking. I'm not totally like my mother. She yelled all the time. I don't usually lose my temper. I never put my kids down, even when I am mad at them. My mom called us all sorts of names.</b></p> <p><b>Every parent loses their temper now and then. So I'm not being just like my mother.</b></p> <p><b>One incident doesn't make me a terrible mother. Look at all the good things I do such as cooking good meals, taking the kids to the zoo, going to their school activities, reading them bedtime stories, etc.</b></p> |

She could then proceed to challenging the subsequent negative thoughts about how her children will feel about her in the future. Such thoughts would involve fortunetelling.

The final step in the four column technique (some sheets include a fifth column for this) is to note how challenging the ANTs makes the person feel. While there is no room on this particular

sheet to note such changes in feelings, this person might find that they feel less depressed and less convinced of their negative thoughts after going through this process.

## Getting Personal

*Use the following four column form to work on one of your own situations and the negative feelings associated with it. Write down a situation which upset or bothered you in the first column. Then in the second column, write down any automatic negative thoughts which you had in response to the situation. In the third column, indicate the feelings that you had or negative behaviors which followed (such as giving up or withdrawing from people). Finally, in the fourth column, develop a more rational way of seeing the situation. Some people can have negative thoughts without a triggering situation. If that occurs for you, then just fill in the last three columns.*

| <b>Objective Situation<br/>(The "Event")</b> | <b>Automatic Negative<br/>Thoughts</b> | <b>Negative<br/>Consequences</b> | <b>Realistic, Logical<br/>Thoughts</b> |
|--|--|----------------------------------|--|
|  |  |                                  |  |

## Stress Inoculation Training

The coping strategies for negative thinking that have been presented thus far have been designed

mainly to help you to recognize and deal with negative thoughts after they have already begun to occur. Another type of coping process was developed by Donald Meichenbaum. It is called Stress Inoculation Training, and it prepares individuals to confront stressful and anxiety-provoking situations by providing them with useful statements that can be kept in mind. In this technique, the person already has certain coping statements “in hand.” Just as a shot can inoculate a person against coming down with a disease, the purpose of this method is to inoculate individuals against being overwhelmed by stress.

This type of approach is especially helpful for circumstances that the individual knows about ahead of time or which occur over and over, such as giving a speech, taking a test, having to confront someone, and so on. The technique has been demonstrated to be effective in a variety of situations, including stress from teaching, dental anxiety, and even scuba diving. There are four phases in this process:

1. Getting prepared for the stress.
2. Dealing with the stressful situation before any strong feelings start to arise.
3. Coping with the stressful situation after high tension levels start to occur.
4. Reviewing the stress and coping process afterwards and learning from it.

### **1. Preparing for the Stressor**

The first stage of coping is readying your mind for what is coming up and rehearsing how to handle it. This planning and preparation stage begins the process of combating negative thinking before it ever really gets started. It is a form of positive “self-talk.”

*Some Coping Statements That Can Be Used in This Phase:*

What is it that I have to do here?  
I just need to stay focused on the here and now.  
I can handle this. I can “psych” myself up for this.  
Nothing bad is happening right now, and If I stay calm nothing bad will happen.  
Worrying is not going to help me.  
I’m going to breathe calmly and easily.

### **2. During the Stressor**

The purpose of this stage is to control the stress reaction by keeping task oriented rather than becoming emotion focused. The coping thoughts are centered on the idea that some degree of stress is normal and that now is the time to use your coping skills. Overall, it seeks to contain and limit the stress reaction.

*Some Coping Statements That Can Be Used in This Phase:*

Easy does it.

I don't have to deal with all the stress at once.  
I'll just take this one step at a time.  
What is it that I have to do here? What is my task? I'm just going to stay task oriented.  
I'm not going to overreact to things.  
It's natural to be tense. My tension is a cue to start using my coping skills.  
I'll relax and take a slow deep breath. That feels better.  
As long as I keep calm, then I'm in control  
Maybe this situation isn't as serious as I am making it out to be.  
I'll look for the positives here and not immediately jump to negative conclusions.

### **3. If the Person Begins to Feel Overwhelmed**

Not all persons get to this step. These statements and strategies are designed to be used when you are having difficulty staying reasonably calm and task oriented. This third stage of coping uses thoughts emphasizing that even some coping is better than no coping. The statements point out that it is not always possible to avoid anxiety, but it still may be feasible to keep stress at a reduced level. Like thoughts in the previous stage, these concepts direct the person to remain focused on the present and to return to being task oriented.

*Some Coping Statements That Can Be Used in This Phase:*

Just because I'm feeling a little dizzy (or my heart is pounding, etc.) doesn't mean that I'm going to faint (or have a heart attack, etc.) or that something terrible is going to happen.  
If I stay focused on what I'm doing, there's less time to worry about my body, and my symptoms will eventually go away.  
I'll stay focused on the task of ... (whatever the task is).  
I'm not going to try to get rid of my stress totally--just keep it under control.  
I'll label my stress from 0 to 10 and then watch it go down.  
I'll take the issue point by point.  
It's time to use my problem solving and other coping techniques.  
It's time to take a slow deep breath and to relax.

### **4. Following the Stressor**

After the stressful situation is over, it is important to learn from the event. The person can "pat themselves on the back" for what they did well. A certain amount of self-praise is in order when someone tries something new. Rather than insisting to themselves that they should have coped perfectly, a person can acknowledge that at least they made an effort. Even if problems occur when trying out new coping techniques, something can usually be learned from the experience.

*Some Coping Statements That Can Be Used in This Phase:*

That wasn't as bad as I thought it would be.

I handled that pretty well.  
I might have started to get carried away at points, but I'll do even better next time.  
I can learn from my mistakes.  
What did I do that worked and didn't work?  
If I had it to do over again, what would I do differently?  
But I did it, and that's the important thing.  
Wait until I tell my wife (my friend, etc.) about it.

### **Using Affirmations**

Research has shown that making positive statements can lift a person's mood and making negative statements can lower one's mood. Negative thoughts can become self-fulfilling prophecies, but positive thoughts can also. It can be a valuable experience to look for the positives in life.

### **Getting Personal**

*Here are some positive affirmations. Fill in the blanks with something personal. Say them quietly or out loud to yourself on a daily basis. Use affirmations whenever you have a moment to yourself, such as when you are riding in the car. Even if your mood is neutral rather than depressed or anxious, you can use them to shift your attention to the positive aspects of your life.*

*I can overcome my problems.  
Everyone has problems. I'm no different from everyone else.  
Each day has opportunities to learn something and to grow in some way.  
I can use today to try out new ways of coping and new ways of relating to people.  
I am fortunate to have \_\_\_\_\_ in my life.  
The best thing about my life right now is \_\_\_\_\_.  
The thing I like most about myself right now is \_\_\_\_\_.  
Someone in my life who is positive and treats me well is \_\_\_\_\_.*

### **FAQ: Frequently asked questions**

*I'm not depressed when I have negative thoughts. I'm just being realistic. Isn't cognitive therapy and working on negative thoughts just being a "Pollyanna" or using the "power of positive thinking?"*

Many persons believe that they are being realistic when they actually are being overly pessimistic. They begin to confuse "realism" with negative thinking. Cognitive therapy does not mean thinking in a "Pollyanna" fashion. It involves a careful examination of the real facts of a situation. The affirmations at the end of this handout might seem to be wishful thinking, but they are not meant to be a total approach to dealing with problems.

They are just one component of an overall approach.

*Why not just avoid thinking negative thoughts? Why bother to go to all this trouble of challenging negative thoughts by labeling them, looking at the evidence, etc. Isn't there a simpler way?*

When people shut out negative thoughts, they can still come back later, especially when stress continues to build. Merely blocking out such thoughts is not facing up to a situation. The person under stress needs a way to deal with their difficulties realistically. When the person's main coping strategy is to shut out such thoughts, then a variety of problems and symptoms can occur later on, including depression, anxiety, and physical symptoms.

### Further Reading for Clients

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- Emery, G., & Campbell, J. (1986). Rapid relief from emotional distress. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Seligman, M.E.P. (1991). Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Young, J.E., & Klosko, J.S. (1993). Reinventing your life. New York: Penguin.

### Further Reading for Therapists

- Beck, A.T., Rush, A.J., Shaw, B., & Emery, G. (1979). Cognitive therapy of depression. New York: Guilford Press.
- Hawton, K., Salkovskis, P., Kirk, J., & Clark, D. (Eds.) (1989). Cognitive behavior therapy for psychiatric problems: A practical guide. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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- Meichenbaum, D. (1985). Stress inoculation training. New York: Pergamon.