

SELF-DEFEATING THOUGHTS & BELIEFS

Embracing Optimism

Thoughts that come automatically to mind are often negative, irrational, or unrealistic. Although they may seem valid, automatic thoughts can be very deceptive and self-defeating. Being able to identify patterns in your automatic thoughts is a first step. Then you can learn to shift your outlook and emotions in a more positive direction. Can you see yourself in any of these?

- > **Small picture focus:** After being turned down for a job, Tim thinks, “I couldn’t get this job, why should I even look for another one? I’ll just get passed up.” Tim has formed an opinion based on a single experience and uses this to predict the future.
- > **All or nothing thinking:** Lisa tends to think of things in extremes. She doesn’t consider anything less than perfect to be acceptable. For example, “If I don’t exercise each day, I may as well not bother.” She criticizes herself and others for not doing things as they “should” be done. She often feels stressed.
- > **Making a mountain out of a molehill:** Jill often views small issues as being much more significant than they actually are. For example, when a suggestion she made at work was not adopted, she lost confidence in her abilities. She even worried that she might lose her job. And she also does the reverse. When she does make a contribution, she thinks, “It’s nothing. Anyone could have done as well or better.”
- > **Playing the blame game:** Jeff is quick to blame himself even when he may not be responsible. When a coworker passed him without saying hello he thinks, “She must be mad. What did I do?” Jim does the opposite – blaming others without considering his role in the issue or how he might solve it. He says things like, “How am I supposed to schedule a meeting when no one reads their emails!?”
- > **Being a negative magnet:** Ryan got many positive comments in his yearly review and some constructive feedback. Afterwards he focused exclusively on the minor negative comments and ignored the rest of the review. He “snaps” to the negative rather than accurately balancing the feedback.
- > **Jumping to emotional conclusions:** Sue draws conclusions based on her emotions in the moment. For example, after feeling guilty for forgetting a friend’s birthday, she thinks of herself as a bad person.
- > **Living under a dark cloud:** Maggie is convinced that nothing will ever work out for her. Even small setbacks lead her to believe that she will never be happy. Despite what anyone says to the contrary, she holds onto the notion that there is no joy to be had. Gradually this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Do you recognize any of these patterns in the way you think about yourself, situations, or your future? You may not. Most thinking happens so quickly and so automatically that we don’t even realize what’s going on. The first step is to recognize negative thoughts. Only then can you fight against them.

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PRACTICING OPTIMISM

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1. Event: What happened? Just the facts.

Example: I said hello to my coworker and she looked at me but didn't respond.

2. Thought: What was your negative thought or self-defeating belief?

Example: I must have done something to upset her.

3. Feeling: How did you feel about it?

Example: Guilty, nervous, anxious.

Now try out a more rational approach:

4. Substitute thought: Use the strategies we discussed to help find a substitute thought.

*Example: I don't know of anything I could have done to upset her.
She's been so busy, maybe she was just preoccupied.*

5. New feeling: Notice how your body and emotions feel now.

Example: Calm, relieved, less tense, more able to focus.

Strategies

- Review the evidence
- Put things in perspective
- Avoid hasty judgments
- Give yourself credit

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OPTIMISM CHALLENGE

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Use questions below to help build your optimism “muscles” and get your brain on track for a more positive outlook.

Focus on the positive: Write down three things that have gone well in the past day. These can be major “wins” or just small positive moments. Write down the part you played in making them happen.

Find the benefit: Think of a negative event from your near or distant past. Write it down. Now think of something positive that has or could come of it. Write it down.

Imagine a bright future: Consider a situation that brings up negative thoughts. Picture yourself dealing with it successfully. Imagine the positive feelings. Write down how you’ve succeeded and how it feels.

Find your positive people: Write down at least one person who lifts your spirits and helps you feel positive. Write down one way you could spend more time with that person.

Take care: Write down three things you will do for yourself this week to be healthy and reduce stress.

Believe in yourself. Think of one or more phrases you can use to help remind yourself of the power you have to overcome difficulty. Write them down. You might say, “I’m strong,” or “I’ve made it through rough times before,” or “I can do this.”

Revisit these challenge questions from time to time. Try to push yourself to incorporate their positive takeaways into your daily life. Remember, your brain has the ability to rewire and make an optimistic outlook your norm.

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