

MANAGING NEGATIVE THINKING

TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT

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Negative thoughts are experienced by most people from time to time. Recognising and knowing how to manage them is important for good mental health.

Our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are all linked. It is normal for us to experience negative thoughts sometimes. If our negative thoughts are intrusive they can derail an otherwise good day. They can impact on our well-being, eventually leading to problems such as anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.

This fact sheet provides information about how our thoughts change when we think negatively. It also provides some ideas on what we can do to manage our negative thinking.

COMMON TYPES OF NEGATIVE THINKING

As humans, we are constantly trying to make sense of the world around us. We are often talking to ourselves inside our minds. We may observe, comment, judge, critique, blame, praise, and ask ourselves questions. This inner dialogue is called our self-talk. Sometimes we may be aware of our self-talk, at other times it may be less obvious.

Below is a list of some of the ways our thoughts can change when we think negatively.

Filtering: paying attention to the negative aspects of a situation and discarding the positive.

Black and white thinking: believing a fact or a thought is either right or it is wrong. There is no grey and no room for compromise.

Personalising: believing that we are responsible for events that are outside of our control.

Blaming: believing that things that go wrong are always someone's fault. This can include holding others responsible for your personal pain.

Catastrophising: over exaggerating the significance of an event.

Shoulding: believing that you or other people should behave in a particular way and taking it personally or as a measure of failure if you or they do not.

Emotional reasoning: believing that your feelings are the truth (e.g. if you feel like a failure or stupid, then you are).

Being right: the need to always prove that your opinions and actions are correct. Where being wrong is not an option and you go to any length, including risking ruining a relationship, to prove you are right.

Jumping to conclusions: predicting a negative outcome even though there is no evidence to support your conclusion. Also called mind reading where you believe you know that someone else is thinking negatively about you without checking the facts.

Overgeneralisation: you see one negative event as an overarching pattern that will continue.

Fallacy of happiness: believing that you can only be happy if other people behave in a certain way.

Fallacy of fairness: you think you know what is fair, and feel upset when others do not agree.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/cognitive-behaviour-therapy
- www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/For-Clinicians/Unhelpful-Thinking-Styles
- www.psychologytools.com/resource/unhelpful-thinking-styles
- www.moodgym.com.au
- www.sane.org/information-stories/the-sane-blog/managing-symptoms/changing-thinking-styles-for-better-mental-health

We can learn to automatically think helpful thoughts.

Just like learning to ride a bike or drive a car, self-talk is something that we have learned over the years. Our self-talk can be automatic, switching itself on without us realising. We can learn to change our self-talk to make it more helpful and realistic. If we practise helpful self-talk, this can become something that is automatic, so we can automatically think helpful thoughts.

MANAGING NEGATIVE THINKING

Train yourself to identify automatic thoughts

If unhelpful thinking is habitual, it can be difficult to change. The first step is to learn to recognise our thoughts. Practising recording our thoughts in a thought diary can be helpful.

Consider the bigger picture

Ask yourself some questions. Is this true? Is there evidence? Is this a fact or a feeling? Take a deep breath or two and allow yourself to step back from your thoughts.

Relax the rules a little

When you think in terms of preferences instead of demands you immediately remove a lot of pressure. Replace rigid words like "must" and "should" with phrases like "I would prefer" or "It would be nice". Try to remove value judgments from your assessments of people and situations (e.g. avoiding words like failure, useless, hopeless, incompetent or selfish).

Allow for possibilities

Life is rarely totally hopeless or completely magnificent. Most of the time, our experiences vary between these extremes. Remain open minded and allow for possibilities rather than making definite statements. Try saying "may" instead of "will", for instance, "I may have trouble" rather than "it will be too difficult."

Consider the likelihood

What is the likelihood that your worry will occur? Keep in mind the difference between possible (0.001% chance) and probable (50% chance or more that it will occur).

Shift your focus

If you become stuck thinking in a negative way, you can learn to shift focus. One way is to place your attention on coping strategies for dealing with the problem rather than ruminating about the problem itself. Another way is to focus on the opposite of the primary mental theme. For example, if you tend to focus on the theme of loss, instead focus on what you still have that is of value. If your theme is danger, focus instead on things in your environment that represent comfort and safety.

Reduce blaming yourself

Remember that not everything that goes wrong is your fault. People do not think about us as much as we assume. Most of the time people probably don't even notice the mistakes that we make. It can be useful to think of other reasons why a person may have acted a certain way. If you remain unsure or concerned about their behaviour, ask them what is wrong to check out if your assumptions are correct.

When to seek help

If negative thinking is interfering with your quality or enjoyment of life, then professional support is available through counselling and psychological services.

