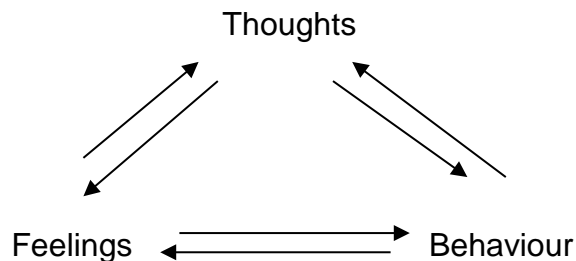# BANISHING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

Negative thoughts can be about ourselves, other people, our situation, the world in general, the past, the future.

People often get into the habit of negative thinking if they are living with

- ♦ stress and anxiety
- ♦ depression
- ♦ low self-esteem
- ♦ self-hate

Circumstances and other people's treatment of us can engender and reinforce these emotional states, but we also reinforce them if we fail to notice our patterns of negative thinking, and fail to challenge those patterns.

Our experience can be thought of in three parts:

Thoughts

Feelings ⟷ Behaviour

These three elements are intricately connected; therefore negative thinking can lead to bad feelings and unconstructive behaviours. For example if you frequently think, "I'm useless" you are likely to sink into a depressed mood and /or to withdraw from people so they don't see how useless you are. When you are lonely, isolated and feeling depressed you are more likely to carry on thinking negatively: your mood affects your thoughts and your isolation means you are not around other people who could contradict your opinion of yourself, directly or indirectly. Thus you can be caught in a vicious cycle.

Banishing negative thoughts, with practice, can lead to happier moods, raised self-confidence, more constructive ways of living, and better relationships.

There are two steps to banishing negative thoughts: **IDENTIFYING** them and **CHALLENGING** them in your mind.

IDENTIFYING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

There are some common patterns of negative thinking. Take one of your regular negative thoughts and see if it fits into one or more of the following patterns.

1. All or Nothing Thinking allows for no middle ground – if something didn't go perfectly it was "a complete failure". If you don't look like a model, you're "ugly". If your presentation wasn't "brilliant", it was "rubbish". You may even use words inside your head, when you think, such as " always , never, nobody, all the time " etc.

2. Overgeneralising exaggerates the specific facts – if two girlfriends in a row finish with you, you think to yourself "women always dump me in the end". It can lead to labelling as a result – if you've backed out of a couple of romantic situations and then label yourself as "hopeless with women/men" or a "total coward". Labels don't help us to feel good about ourselves or the possibilities for change!

3. Mental Filtering is being presented with a mass of information but homing in exclusively on the negative parts of it and ignoring the rest. So you might be composing your CV and end up depressed because you are worrying about the lack of work experience or your A-level grades. And at the same time totally ignoring that you have done a lot of voluntary work.

4. Discounting The Positive is similar to mental filtering. It's when:
    a) you notice or acknowledge your positive qualities or achievements but won't count them as important, or celebrate them. "Well yes I did get a 2 :1 mark for that assignment but it was just a fluke". "Yes three people have told me I look nice today but they're just saying that to cheer me up".
    b) You don't even notice your positive qualities or achievements.

5. Crystal ball gazing or "Fortune Telling", is talking to yourself as if you have the privilege of knowing what the future holds, when you don't!   "I'll never find anyone"; "I'm bound to feel out of it if I go to their house party". This is projecting negative feelings and experiences from the present and past, forward as if they will inevitably stay with you or be repeated. You may even make an image of a future event in your head and then believe that image to be a true representation of what will happen " for certain".

6. Mind reading is believing you know what other people are or will be thinking even though they've said nothing, or they're not even there. "They think I'm boring", "they think I should have got back with her" or "He'll think I'm really pathetic if I ask him to help". (Note the overlap with crystal ball gazing here).

7. Emotional reasoning is when you interpret your negative feelings as evidence of the facts/truth about yourself or your situation. "I feel guilty so I must have done

the wrong thing" or even "I feel so bad, I must be a bad person". It can also lead to <u>labelling</u>, such as "I'm always depressed, I must be a depressive person".

8. <u>Personalisation</u> (sometimes called misattribution) is when you mentally take responsibility for something that wasn't or isn't your responsibility. "It's my fault he was so nasty to me in that seminar, I should have kept quiet"; "it's my fault Mum's been so ill, I should have taken a year out and stayed at home".

9   <u>What iffing</u>. This is when you say to yourself " What if…?" This will raise your anxiety. "What if he breaks up with me? " " What if I fail the course " etc.

IDENTIFYING THE TYPE OF THOUGHTS YOU HAVE HELPS YOU TO DISTANCE YOURSELF SLIGHTLY AND GAIN THE PERSPECTIVE REQUIRED TO CHALLENGE THEM.

CHALLENGING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

You challenge your thought by questioning how valid/true/rational it is, and there are different ways of questioning, which can be used alone or combined.

1. Do I have enough information to come to this conclusion? Are there obvious gaps in my awareness of the facts? If I knew more, would it be possible to think something different? If so, stop your negative thinking and get the information!

2. What is the evidence to support this thought? AND WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE AGAINST IT? In the light of all the evidence have I reached a fair and balanced point of view? If not, what would be a fairer and more accurate way of thinking?

3. (For fears of something bad happening in the future) what are the realistic chances of this happening? Am I over-estimating the chances due to my fear? What are other likely outcomes? Have I under-estimated my own ability to cope with a possible difficulty?

5. Am I in the habit of thinking this thought? How did I learn this habit? Am I simply repeating the put-downs that someone/others in my past dished out to me? Were they being objective and fair in their assessment of me?

6. Would my best friend agree with my thinking? Would I be less harsh about this situation if it was a mate who was in it rather than me? Do I have one standard for other people and another for myself – do I expect myself to be perfect? If I do, am I setting myself up for a happy or an unhappy existence?

7. Answering any "What if?" questions that you generate. If you can answer a "What if" then you will generate a series of options that will possibly help you to reduce your anxiety.

Practise this process in writing using the attached table and soon it will become second nature !

BANISHING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

Once you have evaluated and challenged your thoughts as described you will be able to replace them with more positive, or at the very least more rational and objective, thoughts. You will be able to eliminate the self-critical or self-undermining tone of them. As well as the emotional relief of this, it is extremely likely that thinking more positively about yourself and/or your situation will lift your mood and over time your self-esteem.

Challenging your negative thoughts and replacing them with positive ones is a process that needs to be learned and practised like any other. Don't give up! With time you will get better and better at catching your self-critical, fearful, pessimistic thoughts, and quicker at evaluating, challenging and changing them.

GOOD LUCK!

☺   ☺   ☺   ☺   ☺   ☺   ☺   ☺   ☺   ☺   ☺

USEFUL BOOKS TO READ

Overcoming Low Self-Esteem : A Self-Help Guide using Cognitive-Behavioural Techniques by Melanie Fennell (Constable & Robinson)

Creating Self-Esteem : A Practical Guide to Realizing Your True Worth by Lynda Field (Vermilion)

The Achilles Syndrome : Overcoming the Secret Fear of Failure By Petruska Clarkson (Element Books Ltd)

There Is Nothing Wrong With You : Going Beyond Self-Hate By Cheri Huber (Keep It Simple Books)

Feel The Fear and Do It Anyway : How to Turn Your Fear and Indecision into Confidence and Action By Susan Jeffers (Rider and Co)

Anxious Thought	Pattern	Challenging Information	Positive Thought
1)			
2)			
3)			
4)			