



Negative Thoughts



Black-or-White Thinking

Most things in life can't be conceptualized as all or nothing, yet some of us try to fit everything into these two extremes. This is the pattern that can lead you to believe that if you're not perfect, you're a complete failure (the tiniest typo on a report, the most minor constructive criticism can send you into a tailspin of self-doubt and depression).

Are you sometimes an all-or-nothing thinker? Give an example:

Overgeneralizing

One event guarantees a string of the same. This is the distortion that might lead you to predict, "I'll feel as bad as I did today for every single day this winter."

Are you sometimes an overgeneralizer? Give on example:

Filtering Out The Positive

Despite the fact that the day had its ups and downs, the person thinking through a filter sees only the negative: "Not one good thing happened to me today." A variation on this theme is discounting the positive: You recognize it but insist it "doesn't count."

Do you filter out the positive and focus only on the negative? Give on example:



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Negative Thoughts Continued



Jumping to Conclusions

We're all mind readers or fortune-tellers sometimes. But if you think this way often, you might constantly interpret others' behavior as a sign that they don't like you, can't stand to be around you, feel sorry for you, and so on, despite the fact that you can't read their minds. Or you might say, like the person quoted above, "I'll never get out of this cycle of feeling horrible every winter."

Are you a mind reader or a fortune-teller? Give an example:

Catastrophizing

The worst is always going to happen, according to this kind of thinking. You might maximize an impact ("I made such a huge mistake on that report that I'm bound to be fired!") or minimize one ("No one will care that I got a perfect score on the SAT-I still won't get into a good college").

Do you tend to catastrophize? Give on example:

Personalization

You're to blame for things you can't possibly control. If you can't seem to give up the idea that having SAD is all your fault, you're personalizing.

Do you engage in personalization? Give an example:



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Negative Thoughts Continued



Emotional Reasoning

Your emotions are facts. If you dread that spring will never come, you believe you really won't feel better once May arrives (despite the fact that you've felt better in May every year).

Do you engage in emotional reasoning? Give an example:

Shoulds

You impose very high standards on yourself and on others. As a result, you end up feeling guilty when you don't live up to them ("I should have been able to pull myself together to go to Marnie's birthday party since she's my best friend") or resentful when others don't ("Tim made it impossible for me to get that report done-he should have known I'd need extra time").

Do you think in shoulds? Give an example:

Labeling

You attach names (often inaccurate ones) to characterize yourself or someone else rather than just objectively describing what you or the other person did ("I'm a lazy bum" instead of "I couldn't find the energy to do those chores this morning").

Do you use labeling? Give an example:



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Accurately identifying the cognitive distortions you tend to use isn't easy, but being aware that we all use them can prevent some ANTs from bugging you. Practice as much as you feel able by continuing to log your own negative thoughts. This is also an area where a CBT therapist can help tremendously.

Challenging Automatic Thoughts

Fortunately, negative automatic thoughts can be challenged and replaced with ones that will help, not hinder, your abilities to cope with SAD. Again, this takes a bit of concerted effort, but you can tackle this type of CBT "homework" just a few minutes at a time. Try to do this once a day.

1. If you've been using a thought log, take a quick look at the ones you've filled in and pick one incident where your mood was most severely affected.
2. Thinking back to that event, rate on a scale of 1-10 how strongly you believed the thought that followed the event. If you like, jot that number next to the thought.
3. Now challenge the thought, as if you were cross-examining your own mind.

What evidence do you have that supports the thought?

- What evidence do you have that refutes the thought?
- What's the worst thing that could happen regarding this thought?

The best? The most realistic?

- How could you have handled the event to solve the problem created?



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Negative Thoughts Continued

What Advice Would You Give to Someone You care About?

It can be tough to remove yourself enough from the situation and the thought process to view the whole quick sequence objectively. Try to take yourself out of the equation and pretend a friend or relative has come to you to ask you how to solve the problem that the event created. What advice would you offer?

Replacing Automatic Thoughts

Now here's the important part:

1. Come up with a new, rational thought to replace the old negative thought, based on the "cross-examination" you just did.
2. Assign it a rating of 1-10 for how strongly you believe it.
3. Look back at your old automatic thought and rate it again now that you have a rational thought as an alternative. Is it lower?
4. See how your new, rational thought affects your emotions and mood. Do you feel less depressed? Has the new thought generated any positive emotions?

If you don't believe pretty strongly in your new rational thought, it's not a good alternative! If your rating for the new thought is low, try the challenging process again to generate a new thought. Keep trying until you come up with one until you rate it highly and it changes your emotional response in a positive direction.



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