



Negative Thoughts

Learning how to manage negative thoughts can also help to manage your anxiety and low mood. When people are feeling low or anxious, their thoughts can often be extreme or unrealistic.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) calls these types of thoughts Negative Automatic Thoughts or NATs. As thoughts can influence our emotions, behaviour and vice versa, it is important to learn how to challenge some of our NATs.

Although some people understand that their negative thoughts may not be true, it can be very difficult for people with anxiety or low mood to differentiate between the two and they often take their negative thoughts as fact.

Examples of NATs include:

- "Nobody likes me."
- "Everything always goes wrong for me."
- "If I am late for work, I will lose my job."
- "They think I'm stupid."

What is the difference between a thought and an emotion?

The above are examples of thoughts, usually a statement about something or someone. A thought is usually a sentence or statement. An emotion is a word which describes how we feel, and is usually one word. Examples of emotions include angry, happy, anxious, depressed, etc.

When people are feeling anxious, there are a number of unhelpful thinking styles that they may be using. An example is fortune telling, and usually involves predicting a negative event or outcome for a future event.



Step 1 – Catching Thoughts

Catching negative thoughts can be difficult as it is probably something that we are not used to doing.

It is quite important to be able to prioritise time to practice catching your negative thoughts. Where there are lots of thoughts, try and identify the thought that causes the most distress or the “hot thought”. When you have the “hot thought” how strongly do believe it from 0 to 100%?

In order to help you catch your thoughts, ask yourself the following sorts of questions:

- What were you doing?
- Who were you with?
- Where were you?
- What were you telling yourself?
- What is the worst thing that went through your mind?
- What does it say about you if it's true?

There are also a number of points to bear in mind when you are trying to catch your NATs:

- They are short and specific
- They occur extremely quickly after the event
- They can occur as words or images
- They do not arise from careful thought
- They do not occur in a logical series of steps
- They seem reasonable at the time



Thought Traps

When catching your NATs, you may also find that there is a theme to your negative thinking. We call these thought distortions or thought traps. Here are some examples below:

ALL OR NOTHING THINKING

- You see things in extreme or in black and white.
- "It is either perfect, or it is a mess", "My friend likes me or he doesn't."

OVER-GENERALISATION

- You see a single negative event as proof that other similar events will turn out the same way.
- If one person behaved in a spiteful way to you, then all people behave in this way.

MENTAL FILTER

- You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it, viewing the whole situation as negative.
- Refusing to notice any positives or anything that went well/you did well.

DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

- You reject positive experiences by insisting they 'don't count' for some reason or another. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.

JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

- You make a negative interpretation when there are no definite facts supporting your conclusion.
- Mind Reading – you conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, but you do not check this out with them.
- Fortune Telling – You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel that your prediction is an already established fact.



MAGNIFICATION/CATASTROPHISING

- You exaggerate the importance of things, such as, something you may have thought was wrong.
- You inappropriately shrink your achievements or desirable qualities.

EMOTIONAL REASONING

- You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are "I feel like a failure, therefore, I am one".

SHOULD/MUST STATEMENTS

- You set your self standards of what you perceive you 'should' or 'must' be doing. These standards are often too high and unrealistic.
- The emotional consequence is guilt.
- When you direct should statements towards others, you feel anger, frustration and resentment.

LABELING AND MISLABELING

- This is an extreme form of over generalising. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: 'I'm a loser'.
- When someone else's behaviour bothers you, you attach a general label to them 'he's an idiot'.
- Mislabelling involves describing with language that is highly coloured and emotionally loaded.

PERSONALISING

- You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event, when in fact you did not have primary or any responsibility.



Activity

Have a think about your own unhelpful ways of thinking. Can you recognise a pattern?

My main unhelpful ways of thinking are:

The next time I notice myself using them, I will try to:

In order to combat the negative effects that these thoughts can have on our emotions and behaviours, we need to start by learning how to catch our NATs by using a thought diary.

Take a look on the next page at an example of a thought diary, then have a go at making your own.



Her-Place

Charitable Trust

SITUATION When did it happen? Where was it? What were you doing? Who were you with?	EMOTIONS What were you feeling? How intensely did you feel it? (0-100%)	THOUGHTS What were you thinking? How much did you believe it? (0-100%) Which thought traps might these be?
Example: I did not pass my exam today, I was preparing for it for 4 weeks	Anxious 80% Low 100%	I will not get through this year 60% I am no good 60% My parents will be disappointed 75% I am a failure 90%



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Step 2 – Looking for the Evidence

After catching your NATs, the next stage is to challenge these negative thoughts.

The process of challenging these extreme and unhelpful thoughts focuses on looking at the evidence for and against the thought. To help you when you are looking for evidence, you might want to ask questions such as:

- How would someone else think about the situation?
- If I wasn't anxious, how would I look at the situation?
- Is there any other way of looking at the situation?
- How can challenging thoughts help me?

More balanced thoughts will improve your mood and enable you to function better, which will result in enjoying your life again. Opinions or thoughts are what people think. People do not need to have any scientific evidence in order to have an opinion or thought, and just because someone has a thought or opinion does not necessarily make it true. This type of evidence is subjective and therefore difficult to prove.

Factual evidence is much stronger as there cannot be any element of doubt. Factual evidence is objective and therefore very difficult to disprove. When challenging negative thoughts, we need to practice looking for evidence for and against the negative thought. The idea is that we work with the thought which causes the most emotional distress, which is usually the one with the highest belief rating. We then need to create a new alternative thought which is based on the evidence.