

# Healthy Thinking

Use your thoughts to increase your happiness. Make it a goal to think about positive events and experiences in your daily life as much as possible. Inaccurate thoughts can be challenged and changed. Here are some effective techniques for changing your negative thought patterns to positive ones. It will improve your mood, your happiness, and your health.

**Track your thoughts** Recognizing unhelpful negative thinking is the first step to stopping them. The best way to change your thinking is to write it down.

- At the top of a piece of paper, briefly describe what is bothering you. Just record the facts of the situation without judgment or interpretation.
- Next, draw three columns. Above the left column, write down "Feelings/body response," and list in the column what you feel (angry, depressed, anxious, guilty, headache, weak, etc.).
- Above the middle column, write "Negative thoughts," and list the thoughts that went through your mind just before and during the situation. If there are many, pick the stronger ones.
- Above the right column, write "Alternative responses," and list the arguments against each of your major negative thoughts. Write down a more rational response to it.

Think of your thoughts as hypotheses or guesses. Then critically examine them. Take a good look at the evidence, and compare your thoughts to alternative ways of seeing the situation.

Just reading this exercise won't help straighten out your thinking. You need to practice it. At first, be sure to do this exercise in writing, not just in your head. Later you will be better able to recognize some of your negative patterns and correct them as they go through your mind.

**Uncover your core beliefs** You can learn a lot by identifying the deeper beliefs that give rise to your negative self-talk. One way to get at them is to take each negative statement and ask yourself, "If that were true, what would it mean and why would that be bad?" For instance, if you're worried that the report you're about to turn in isn't absolutely accurate, you might ask yourself, "If there are errors in this report, why would that be bad?" Your reply might be, "It would mean I haven't done a perfect job."

That leads to the question, "If I didn't do a perfect job, why would that bother me?" You might find yourself up against an entirely unreasonable belief that nothing short of perfection is acceptable. Here are some examples of other common (but irrational—and often deep-seated) beliefs:

- Fear and anxiety are the only reasonable responses to anything that is unknown and uncertain.
  - When people disapprove of me, it means I am wrong or bad.
  - There is a perfect love and a perfect relationship.
  - My worth as a person depends on how much I produce and achieve.
  - It's easier to avoid life's difficulties than to face them.
  - I'm very fragile and vulnerable.
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- If I feel something, then it must be true.
  - Unusual physical symptoms always mean that something is seriously wrong with me.

**Challenge your "shoulds"** Underlying beliefs often involve the word "should":

- I should be thin.
- I should be at the top of my profession.
- I should be a more devoted daughter.

Also watch for the words "must," "have to" and "ought to." They often substitute for "should." Many of us are stuck with "shoulds" that are no longer relevant to us. We may have adopted them many years ago in order to earn someone's approval—perhaps our parents or peers.

When you become aware of a "should," write it down and trace it back to where it came from. Does it represent something you really care about? Does it empower you or drain you? Do you still need it?

If a "should" statement does represent a genuine value which you aren't living up to, try substituting "want" or "could" for "should." So instead of thinking, "I should go visit my mother," say, "I want to go visit my mother." It's a much more positive statement. And it becomes a desire or intention upon which you choose to act, without the added burden of guilt.

**Use an affirmation** To break the cycle of automatic, negative thoughts, many people find it helpful to repeat positive statements called affirmations. Over time, these affirmations become just as powerful as the negative statements used to be. Think of a few strong, positive statements about yourself. Put them in the present tense, as though they were already true, such as: "I take care of my body" or "I'm good at my job."

Set aside a few minutes each day to repeat affirmation statements to yourself. Read more on my website, blog or FB.

**Get a sense of control** A sense of control is important to having an optimistic outlook. "Control" in this context doesn't mean a false sense of power or freedom from unexpected events. It refers to the belief that you can always have some impact on your situation and some degree of

choice.

It's important to find at least one small area in which you can cultivate a sense of competence and confidence. Take time to work on a favorite hobby, cook a special meal, or deal with an annoying home maintenance problem. Get your taxes organized early, or discuss a difficult situation with a coworker. Your success puts an end to negative generalizations such as, "I can't do anything," and it encourages you to take more steps toward success.

Read more about how to manage change in your life through my newsletters and blog **Rehearse success** When you aren't happy with the way you handled a particular situation, try this exercise:

- Write down three ways that it could have gone better.
- Write down three ways it could have gone worse.
- If you can't think of alternatives to the way you handled it, imagine what someone whom you greatly respect would have done.
- Or think what advice you would give to someone else facing a similar situation.
- Remember that mistakes aren't failures. They're good opportunities to learn. Mistakes give you the chance to rehearse other ways of handling things. This is great practice for future crises.

**Practice gratitude exercise** Every day for two weeks, keep a journal of two to three things that you are grateful or thankful for in your life. These should be things that occurred to you in the past day. You may be grateful for other people, your health, your job, your assets, a meal you just had, a sunset, a compliment...anything or anyone. It is okay to repeat something from a previous day, but try to find new things, no matter how great or how small. Make the entries as specific as you can. One interesting side effect of this simple exercise is that you may find yourself throughout the day looking for things to be grateful for. This improves your mood not only at the time you are making your notes, but throughout the entire day! Studies have shown that people who complete this gratefulness exercise for just two weeks are measurably happier. Of course, you can continue beyond two weeks or repeat the exercise whenever you wish.

As a further mood-booster, you can speak with, write to, or call someone you are grateful for, and let them know how much you appreciate them. You can improve the mood of two people at the same time.

**Act as if...**By acting as if something good were true, you can generate positive feelings and thoughts. So you can act yourself into a new way of feeling as easily as you can think yourself into a new way of acting. By changing your facial expression alone you change your physiology as well as your mood.

Even when you don't feel like doing something differently, just pushing yourself to try can sometimes shift your mood in a positive direction. Don't worry that you don't feel like doing it. Fake it. Pretend self-esteem. Assume optimism. Be outgoing. Act as if you were confident. Just going through the motions can cause a powerful change. Soon you'll be enjoying the feelings that go along with your new behavior. Give it a try.

**Be mindful** Set aside some time to simply observe your thoughts, without trying to change them. With practice, you can learn to sit quietly and watch the endless flow of thoughts as they move in and out of your mind. Don't judge them as positive or negative, just watch them come and go.

Over time, this practice removes the emotional dominance of your thoughts. And it opens up more space for a deeper awareness of your present experience. See my blogs on meditation and mindfulness.

**Laugh a little (or a lot!)** Humor may be one of our best antidotes to stressful situations and negative thinking. By seeing the humor in a stressful situation, we may be able to change our response to the stress. When we laugh, we simply cannot be worrying deeply at the same time.

Humor and laughter are natural, powerful medicines that can:

- brighten your mood and improve your sense of well-being
- facilitate positive social interaction
- reduce anxiety, tension, depression, anger, and hostility
- lower stress levels
- exercise your heart and cardiovascular system
- reduce pain

Research has shown that just changing your facial muscles can set off different psychological changes. It can also trigger different thoughts that affect moods of sadness, happiness, and anger. So, when we "put on a happy face" in times of adversity or say "have a nice day," we are actually changing our neurohormone levels, and they change our moods.

A smile-like pose produces pleasant feelings, whereas a pout produces feelings of unhappiness. So even when you don't feel particularly cheerful and you smile, blood flow to the brain increases, and that stimulates the production of positive neurotransmitters. In other words, if you **look** happier, you might actually start to **feel** happier. So if you can't laugh, smile. And if you can't smile, fake it.