
Reframing:

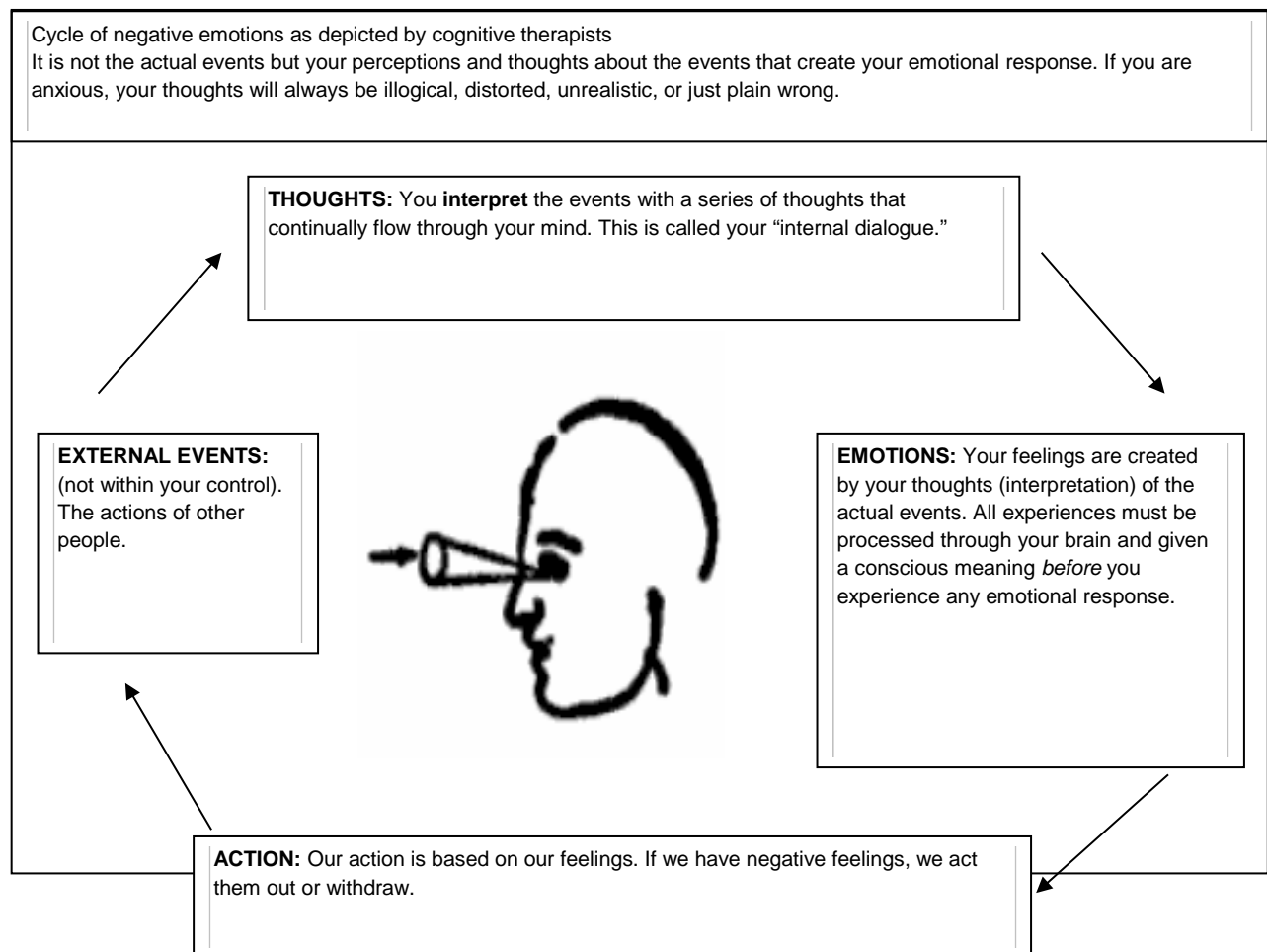
How to Overcome Negative Thinking

Introduction

When we have an empowered relationship to life, we view ourselves as creative, resourceful, and capable. We are excited by challenge and embrace opportunities for connection, learning, growth, and fulfillment.

Occasionally; however, an event or encounter can trigger a flood of negative emotions and we can find ourselves suddenly fearful or anxious and unsure of how to regain our equilibrium. This can then lead to counterproductive behavior that is out of alignment with our goals and values. Furthermore, these emotions can get a grip on us and we can waste precious time and energy ruminating about the past or worrying about the future. Every human being experiences negative states of mind to varying degrees. Most often we blame them on events or our circumstances, which can lead us to feel like helpless victims. This feeds our sense of disempowerment and reinforces negativity, making recovery difficult.

Cognitive psychologists suggest that it is not the actual events that cause us stress but our interpretations and thoughts about what those events mean. This is not a new idea. Two thousand years ago, Epictetus, the Greek philosopher, stated that "People are disturbed not by things, but by the views we take of them." Shakespeare expressed a similar idea when he said, "For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."



Cognitive psychology is a branch of psychology that deals with motivation, problem-solving, decision-making, thinking and attention. Cognitive psychologists believe that **every bad feeling we have is a result of a distorted negative thought**. Dr. David Burns, a pioneer in the field, discovered and named **ten universal conditioned patterns of negative thinking, called “cognitive distortions.”** Cognitive distortions are irrational or exaggerated thought patterns about oneself, one’s environment, and one’s future that perpetuate negative states of mind. In contrast to viewing people as victims of these negative thought patterns, cognitive psychologists have developed a method for how to eliminate them. First, however, it is important to understand what these thought patterns are. Read the definitions to familiarize yourself with the ten cognitive distortions and then review the examples on the next page to see how they play out.

The ten cognitive distortions are:

- 1. ALL OR NOTHING THINKING:** You see things in black and white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.
- 2. OVERGENERALIZATION:** You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
- 3. MENTAL FILTER:** You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened.
- 4. DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE:** You reject positive experiences by insisting they “don't count” for some reason or other. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.
- 5. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS:** You make negative interpretations even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusions. **A). Mind reading:** You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don't bother to check this out. **B). The Fortune Teller Error:** You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an established fact.
- 6. MAGNIFICATION (Catastrophizing) OR MINIMIZATION:** You exaggerate the importance of things (your goof-up or someone else's achievement), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other fellow's imperfections).
- 7. EMOTIONAL REASONING:** You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: “I feel it therefore it must be true.”
- 8. SHOULD STATEMENTS:** You try to motivate yourself with should and shouldn'ts, as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could expect to do anything. “Musts” and “oughts” are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements towards others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.
- 9. LABELING AND MISLABELING:** An extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: “I'm a loser.” When someone else's behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him: “He's a damn louse.” Mislabeled involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.
- 10. PERSONALIZATION:** You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event which in fact you were not primarily responsible for.

Examples:

- **All-or-Nothing Thinking:** John recently applied for a promotion in his firm. The job went to another employee with more experience. John wanted this job badly and now feels that he will never be promoted. He feels that he is a total failure in his career.
- **Overgeneralization:** Linda is lonely and often spends most of her time after work at home. Her friends sometimes ask her to come out for dinner and meet new people. Linda feels that that is it useless to try to meet people. No one really could like her. People are all mean and superficial anyway.
- **Mental Filter:** Mary is having a bad day. As she drives home, a kind gentleman waves her to go ahead of him as she merges into traffic. Later in her trip, another driver cuts her off. She grumbles to herself that there are nothing but rude and insensitive people in her city.
- **Disqualifying the Positive:** Rhonda just had her portrait made. Her friend tells her how beautiful she looks. Rhonda brushes aside the compliment by saying that the photographer must have touched up the picture. She never looks that good in real life, she thinks.
- **Jumping to Conclusions:** Chuck is waiting for his date at a restaurant. She's now 20 minutes late. Chuck laments to himself that he must have done something wrong and now she has stood him up. Meanwhile, across town, his date is stuck in traffic.
- **Magnification and Minimization:** Scott is playing football. He bungles a play that he's been practicing for weeks. He later scores the winning touchdown. His teammates compliment him. He tells them he should have played better; the touchdown was just dumb luck.
- **Emotional Reasoning:** Laura looks around her disheveled house and feels overwhelmed by the prospect of cleaning. She feels that it's hopeless to even try to clean.
- **Should Statements:** David is sitting in his doctor's waiting room. His doctor is running late. David sits stewing, thinking, "With how much I'm paying him, he should be on time. He ought to have more consideration." He ends up feeling bitter and resentful.
- **Labeling and Mislabeled:** Donna just cheated on her diet. *I'm a fat, lazy pig*, she thinks.
- **Personalization:** Jean's son is doing poorly in school. She feels that she must be a bad mother. She feels that it's all her fault that he isn't studying.

How to Work with Negative Thoughts in 3 Easy Steps:

Cognitive Reframing

Cognitive reframing is a technique that can help people identify, challenge and alter stress-inducing thought patterns and beliefs. Reframing teaches us to stop trusting in our automatic tendency to accept the contents of our thoughts as being an accurate assessment of reality. Instead, the goal is to start testing each negative thought we have for accuracy.

The end goal of cognitive restructuring is to enable people to replace stress-inducing thought habits with more accurate and empowering thinking habits.

There is a 3 column technique for dealing positively with negative thoughts:

1. Column One: The first step of cognitive restructuring is to record negative thoughts. It is important to write them down in order to get a handle on them. Thoughts are much easier to manipulate and examine when you've pinned them down on paper. In column one, record your negative thoughts. It is important not to write down your feelings- only thoughts. **As we write, we** learn to slow down our racy, adrenaline-infused thinking and consider whether our thoughts are rational or not.

2. Column Two: Think carefully about the ways in which the thought may be inaccurate or distorted; whether you may be experiencing a cognitive distortion. Then identify which of the 10 distortions are reflected in the thought and write those down in column two. Usually there is more than one.

3. Column Three: After you have named the distortion, the next step is to dispute or debate the thought and formulate a rational response by asking:

- Are my thoughts on the event accurate? Or could I be exaggerating?
- What objective evidence/facts are there to support my view?
- What alternative views are there of the event?
- Am I underestimating my ability to cope with the event?
- What is the worst that can happen if my view of the event is correct?
- What actions can I take to positively influence the event?

After reflecting on these questions you can replace them with more accurate and truthful thoughts that encourage and liberate (rather than discourage) you. This takes work! And practice. It can help to work with a buddy or a friend who can help you be more objective.

You reframe by rewriting your original thought in the rational response column. Write down new ways of thinking or more helpful beliefs that lead to a new approach to dealing with the activating event. With practice, you will be able to start changing the stress-inducing thoughts and you will find yourself feeling less pressured, more in charge and better equipped to take effective action.

As you consider your response do note that **there is a positive intention behind every negative thought.** That inner voice of yours that expresses negativity is only doing so because it wants to help you in some way. Think of the inner voice as “the alarmist” that sounds off to protect you from some threat it perceives. That doesn’t make the thoughts right or acceptable, of course, but it does mean that your inner voice is not an enemy to be resisted - but rather a voice to be reasoned with. By finding the positive intentions behind your thoughts, you can work *with* your mind to find a positive reframe. That is far more effective than chastising yourself for having negative thoughts in the first place!

In summary:

By practicing reframing for 2 weeks you will develop your cognitive muscle and teach your brain a new way of seeing and more accurately perceiving reality. Reframing consistently over time results in physiological changes in the brain that enable you to more quickly and easily recognize distorted thoughts in the moment and reframe them before they cause anxiety and negatively impact your mood and behavior.

If you desire greater emotional stability and the ability to maintain a consistently good attitude - no matter what your circumstances are- then make it a goal and don’t give up until you have reached it.

Take a lesson from Mark Twain who once said, “My mind has been filled with terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened.”

Choose to have an empowered relationship to life by always remembering that you are creative, resourceful and capable and that anything less is a distortion!

Sample Reframing Exercise: Fill in column two.

Automatic Thought	Name the Distortion(s)	Write a rational, more truthful response
<p>I'm failing in my new job. I'm not as good as my peers and not as smart as I should be for this role, and people know this about me. I will never be succeed in this role.</p>	<p>(Fill in the correct distortions- there are more than one)</p>	<p>This is a new and challenging role for me. I will have to develop some new skills in order to succeed. If I don't succeed, it doesn't mean I am incapable. Like everyone, I have strengths & weaknesses. This role may not be the right fit for my strengths but its too soon to tell.</p>

Worksheet: Reframing Exercise

Print 14 worksheets. Spend 15 minutes/ day for 2 weeks reframing your negative thoughts. Ask a friend or colleague to help if you feel stuck.

Automatic Negative Thought	Distortion(s)	A rational, more truthful response