

Managing Automatic Negative Thoughts

Imagine the following scenario...

A laugh escapes through your lips unchecked, as you turn, beaming toward your colleague. Heart pumping, you do a little jig. All the hard work, and effort has finally paid off, and you've got it. This is what you have been working toward for so long, and a celebration is definitely called for.

Once the celebration is over, it's time to buckle down.

As the days wear on, your elation gives way to doubt, and that self defeating little voice starts clamouring for attention.

"What if I haven't got what it takes?"

Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANT's for short) have a way of worming themselves into our consciousness, often before we notice. Like white ants in a weatherboard home, they gnaw away and can erode the very structure of your self belief and confidence.

How to manage them?

A study once quoted by Dr Deepak Chopra suggests that we have around 65,000 thoughts per day, and that many of them (around 95%) are the same thoughts we had yesterday and the day before, and the day before that.

Automatic thoughts can be positive (realistic, goal oriented) or negative (distorted, unproductive and work against us achieving our goals). Some examples of Automatic Negative Thoughts are:

1. All or nothing thinking

This involves seeing things in black and white terms, for instance, if you complete a task less than perfectly, you view it as a failure (even though you may well have done satisfactorily).

2. Overgeneralisation

Taking a single (negative) event and coming to a general conclusion that it will be an endless pattern of negative events or defeat. This is often accompanied by the words "always", and "never".

3. Selective Filtering

Focusing on one negative detail to the exclusion of the positives.

4. Disqualifying the positives

Rejecting positive experiences and maintaining a negative belief even though it is contradicted by your everyday experience.

5. Mind Reading (jumping to conclusions)

Interpreting a situation or event negatively and not checking the facts. e.g. Making assumptions about other people's thoughts and not checking back with them, or anticipating a (negative) future outcome and feeling convinced that it is fact.

6. Catastrophising

Exaggerating the importance or consequence of negative events, or focusing on the possibility of a disaster occurring.

7. Emotional Reasoning

Mistaking your feelings for fact and assuming that your negative emotions are a true reflection of the way things really are.

8. Should Statements

Having unrealistic expectations of yourself and others, and being rigid in your thinking. This often results in feeling guilty because you haven't achieved what you "should" have. Language also includes "must" and "ought".

9. Labelling & mislabelling

Ascribing a negative label to yourself (e.g. I'm a loser), or attaching a negative label to another person (e.g. s/he's a loser)

10. Personalisation

Taking responsibility for something that is not your fault, or seeing yourself as the cause of a negative event that has nothing to do with you.

(The above information is derived from: Burns, D., quoted in Counsel, D., *Causes of Negative Thinking*, and Sharp, Dr. T., *Examples of Automatic Negative Thoughts*, www.makingchanges.com.au)

Managing ANT's

1. Develop awareness of your thoughts

Develop the skill of identifying and listening to the negative messages you give to yourself. Writing a journal of your automatic negative thoughts may be an effective way to do this.

2. Evaluate your thoughts.

Once you become aware of the ANT evaluate and challenge it. Ask yourself: "is it helpful to think this way / does it serve me?" or "am I being realistic?"

3. Look for evidence

Is there any evidence to back up or discount your thoughts? Are you focusing on the negatives and ignoring other information?

4. Search for alternative explanations

Is there another way of looking at the situation, or are there other explanations?

5. Put thoughts into perspective

Is it as bad as you are making out? How likely is it that the worst will happen?

6. Focus on what you **do** want.

Your conscious mind can only hold one thought at a time, so shift your thinking to what you do want.

7. Be persistent

As with any skill, interrupting ANT's may take time and practice to master.