

The Downward Arrow

Your first thought isn't necessarily your only thought. Underlying your automatic thoughts are deeper assumptions and general beliefs about the world. To detect your underlying thinking, you can use an exercise called the Downward Arrow. Briefly, take a negative automatic thought that you have identified. *"I'm going to fail this exam."* *"She hates me."* *"That elephant is going to break loose and crush me like an ant."* What's at least one negative thought that occurred to you in the past week?

This thought (*"My best friend hates me"*) might be accurate or it might not. It's often hard to tell. Assume for the moment that the thought is absolutely true. *"Okay, she really does hate me."* What would be the worst thing about that? What would it mean about you or about your life? (Perhaps: *"It would mean my relationship with her is about to end."*) Write your own answer below.

Now: What if this consequence was also true? What would that mean to you? What would be the worst thing about it?

Imagine that this too is absolutely true. What would that mean? What's the next thought?

And if that was true, then...?

And then?

Keep going until you can't think of anything else. With each step, you may notice that the thinking gets more and more extreme.

Here's an example:

Situation:	Job interviewer glances out window.
Negative automatic thought:	<i>"He's not paying attention to my job interview."</i>
Downward arrow:	<i>"He's bored."</i>
	So: <i>"He's not going to hire me."</i>
	So: <i>"Maybe no one will ever hire me."</i>
	So: <i>"I'm not worth hiring. I have no skills."</i>
	So: <i>"I'll be unemployed forever."</i>
	So: <i>"I won't have money to buy food."</i>
	So: <i>"Eventually I'll lose the strength to go out at all."</i>
	So: <i>"I'll die alone and forgotten."</i>

This person is going to feel overwhelming discouragement and desperation. After all, she is imagining a terrible future for herself. And what brought on this feeling? Her interviewer glancing out the window. A fairly minor event can lead to an immense emotion. But it isn't the *event* that produces the feeling, it's the *interpretation*.

When you do a Downward Arrow, you will usually find that the huge emotions you've been feeling really aren't so mysterious after all. In fact, they make sense. Anyone else who thought the way you do would feel exactly the same way.

The Downward Arrow reveals a lot about the assumptions you make about the world. Usually the underlying assumptions don't come right out in the list of statements, but they do become more obvious. In the case of the job interview, we can see a few assumptions:

- If the interviewer looks out the window, he's bored.
- If he gets bored it's because of me.
- If I bore him he'll never hire me.
- If he doesn't hire me, no one will.

If we look toward the bottom of the downward arrow we can see some very general ideas that we might call *core beliefs*. *"I have no skills."* *"I'm unemployable."* *"The future is bleak."*

As you discover your assumptions and negative core beliefs, other possible interpretations may come to you.

"He might look out the window because he's thinking, not because he's bored."

"It doesn't matter if he's bored; he's hiring a clerk, not an entertainer."

"Even if he doesn't hire me, that doesn't mean others won't."

And for the core beliefs:

"I do so have skills, and they include..."

"I'm obviously employable, because I've had jobs in the past."

"I don't have a crystal ball; how do I know what the future is like?"

Use the Downward Arrow any time you want to discover the assumptions underlying your negative automatic thoughts.