

## Challenging Negative Thoughts

Thought distortions are extremely powerful, in part because they can operate for so many years that they become automatic. Increasing your awareness of your most common distortions can help in two ways:

1. When you become aware of an automatic process, it usually starts to fall apart. When experienced typists watch their hands, they slow down and start making mistakes. What is bad for typing is good for thinking, because you *want* to disrupt negative automatic thoughts.
2. When thoughts occur outside your awareness you cannot bring your critical mind to bear on them. It's like signing papers that come across your desk without reading them: how would you know they didn't contain errors? Increasing your awareness of automatic thinking can help you discover errors, mistaken assumptions, and biases.

Sometimes simple awareness isn't enough, however. You may have to *argue* with your negative thoughts. If you examine your negative thoughts, you will usually find parts that don't really make sense. Perhaps you are telling yourself that you can't handle something, when in reality you have *already* handled similar situations in the past. You might be thinking that nobody cares about you, when really you can think of several people who do care.

On the next page you will find a five-column exercise sheet that you can use for thought challenging. Make as many copies of this page as you like. Here's how to fill it out, column by column:

1. **Situation.** Describe the situation briefly. Example: *"Argument with daughter over car."* Don't go into a lot of detail.
2. **Emotion.** How did you feel in that situation? *"Anxious."* *"Discouraged."* *"Hopeless."* Cognitive therapists believe that these feelings come from what we are thinking about the situation more than from the situation itself. So next, let's look at those thoughts.
3. **Automatic thoughts.** Write down all of the negative automatic thoughts that come to mind. *"No one in this family ever pays attention to me."* *"I'm helpless to do anything about it anyway."* *"She's completely inconsiderate."* *"I'm a terrible parent."*
4. **True?** Rate how much you believe each thought on a 0 to 100 or 0 to 10 scale, where 0 means *"I don't believe this at all"* and 100 means *"I believe this completely."*
5. **More realistic thought.** Respond to each of the negative thoughts with a statement that seems more balanced and true. *"They do pay attention, though not as often as I'd like."* *"It's my car, I get to decide who borrows it."* *"She thinks of others some of the time, but if I'm not satisfied then I need to stand up for myself."* *"I'm not a terrible parent; teenagers can be difficult to deal with."*

Situation	Emotion	Automatic Thoughts	True?	More Realistic Thought

This technique is one of the most powerful techniques in cognitive therapy. Careful practice can bring enormous payoffs, not only with the situation you happen to be concerned about at the time, but with other situations in the future.

### **Developing fair and balanced thoughts**

Sometimes it can be difficult to come up with the more balanced, realistic view. If so, pull back from the problem. Imagine that a friend is going through this situation and saying or thinking all of these negative things. What could you say to help your friend see how distorted the ideas are?

It's not enough just to come up with the more balanced view. Remember that you have probably given yourself the negative message dozens of times in your life. You will probably have to repeat the realistic script many times before it begins to replace the old idea.

- One strategy is to stand in front of a mirror and talk to yourself out loud. You may feel silly at first, but the results are worth it.
- Another technique is to write the realistic thoughts down on a piece of paper and carry it around with you. Read it over whenever you find yourself in a similar situation.

Whichever strategy you use, the balanced view will seem false and artificial for a while. That's because you are more used to the automatic negative thoughts. With time and a lot of practice the balanced view begins to feel more natural. At this point, your emotional response to the situation will begin to change for the better.

### **Is this the power of positive thinking?**

No! This is the power of *realistic* thinking. The problem is that all of us think unrealistically some of the time. The solution is to figure out a more realistic way of seeing the situation and repeat that to ourselves until our emotions begin to respond.

Positive thinking is telling yourself unrealistically positive things ("*Everyone loves me*" or "*I'm the best parent that ever lived*"). This doesn't help in the long run because it becomes obvious that you are kidding yourself. That's why the third column in the table is entitled "More Realistic Thought". You must tell yourself something that you believe (even if at first it may not "feel" true).