

EXAMPLES OF AUTOMATIC NEGATIVE THOUGHTS (ANTs)

One of the basic assumptions of the cognitive model that underlies much of the broader positive psychology model is that the way we think about things is important in determining how we feel. Further, there are times when our thoughts are unhelpfully negative. Recognising these ANTs is the first step in learning to change them (see *Managing Automatic Negative Thoughts*). Here are some of the more common types of negative thoughts.

- (1) **Overgeneralisation:** Coming to a general conclusion based on a single event or one piece of evidence. If something bad happens once, you expect it to happen again and again. Such thoughts often include the words “always” and “never”.

*E.g. I forgot to finish that project on time. I never do things right.
He didn't want to go out with me. I'll always be lonely.*

- (2) **Filtering (Selective Abstraction):** Concentrating on the negatives while ignoring the positives. Ignoring important information that contradicts your (negative) view of the situation.

E.g. I know he [my boss] said most of my submission was great but he also said there were a number of mistakes that had to be corrected...he must think I'm really hopeless.

- (3) **All or Nothing Thinking (Dichotomous Reasoning):** Thinking in black and white terms (e.g., things are right or wrong, good or bad). A tendency to view things at the extremes with no middle ground.

*E.g. I made so many mistakes. If I can't do it perfectly I might as well not bother. I won't be able to get all of this done, so I may as well not start it.
This job is so bad...there's nothing good about it at all.*

- (4) **Personalising:** Taking responsibility for something that's not your fault. Thinking that what people say or do is some kind of reaction to you, or is in some way related to you.

*E.g. John's in a terrible mood. It must have been something I did.
It's obvious she doesn't like me, otherwise she would've said hello.*

- (5) **Catastrophising:** Overestimating the chances of disaster. Expecting something unbearable or intolerable to happen.

*E.g. I'm going to make a fool of myself and people will laugh at me.
What if I haven't turned the iron off and the house burns down.
If I don't perform well, I'll get the sack.*

- (6) **Emotional Reasoning:** Mistaking feelings for facts. Negative things you feel about yourself are held to be true because they feel true.

*E.g. I feel like a failure, therefore I am a failure.
I feel ugly, therefore I must be ugly.
I feel hopeless, therefore my situation must be hopeless.*

- (7) **Mind Reading:** Making assumptions about other people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours without checking the evidence.

*E.g. John's talking to Molly so he must like her more than me.
I could tell he thought I was stupid in the interview.*

- (8) **Fortune Telling Error:** Anticipating an outcome and assuming your prediction is an established fact. These negative expectations can be self-fulfilling: predicting what we would do on the basis of past behaviour may prevent the possibility of change.

*E.g. I've always been like this; I'll never be able to change.
It's not going to work out so there's not much point even trying.
This relationship is sure to fail.*

- (9) **Should Statements:** Using "should", "ought", or "must" statements can set up unrealistic expectations of yourself and others. It involves operating by rigid rules and not allowing for flexibility.

*E.g. I shouldn't get angry.
People should be nice to me all the time.*

- (10) **Magnification/Minimisation:** A tendency to exaggerate the importance of negative information or experiences, while trivialising or reducing the significance of positive information or experiences.

*E.g. He noticed I spilled something on my shirt. I know he said he will go out with me again, but I bet he doesn't call.
Supporting my friend when her mother died still doesn't make up for that time I got angry at her last year.*

NB: The good news is these unhelpful thoughts can be changed. See the "Managing Unhelpful Thoughts" tip sheet for some ideas about where to start.

And if you think you'd benefit from a more detailed explanation of unhelpful thinking and how to manage it, consider Dr. Sharp's "The Happiness Handbook" as well as The Happiness Institute's series of happiness workbooks.