

FFWPU UK Togetherall: Balance Negative Thoughts

Michael Balcomb

April 19, 2022



Negative thinking can send you down and stop you getting the most out of life. But you can learn to change your thinking style.

Studies suggest that to keep us safe we're evolutionarily hard wired to take more heed of the bad stuff. If we're in a healthy frame of mind we're usually able to balance this out with the good stuff. But if we're already feeling bad our tendency to dwell on the bad stuff becomes more marked. Healthy thinking doesn't mean banishing negative thoughts; bad stuff happens, and there's no use in looking at the world through rose-tinted glasses.

Rather it's taking a balanced view - something that can easily get lost, particularly if we're worried or down. Negative and distorted thinking patterns can become habit that's hard to kick. We may not even be aware that we have them. But by recognising some of the common mind traps, and learning to challenge your thinking, you can develop a more realistic take on things.

Who can benefit?

We can all fall into negative thought patterns, but particularly if you're suffering anxiety, stress, depression or low self-esteem.

How to use it

Thought balancing takes practice, so it's best to start by writing things out. As you become more practised, it gets easier to do it in your head.

Through the mind field

These are some of most common mind traps. See how many you recognise.

Common mind traps

Overgeneralising - when something bad happens you assume it's how it will always be. ('I totally messed up that relationship. I'll never be happy with anyone.')

Jumping to the worst conclusions - you see disaster around every corner. ('I've got an awful headache. I'm sure it's brain tumour.')

Only seeing the bad stuff - you seize on the one thing that went wrong, ignoring everything that went right - or reason that the good things don't count. ('I did well, but it was obviously a fluke.')

All or nothing - there's no mid-ground for you. If things fall short of perfection, it's a disaster. ('I got that wrong - the whole thing's pointless.')

Mindreading - you assume others see you badly without checking it out. ('I can tell she doesn't like me.')

Fortune telling - You always predict things will turn out badly. ('I know I'm going to make a complete fool of myself.')

Emotional reasoning - you treat your feelings as fact. ('I'm terrified of flying. This plane is going to crash.')

Control fallacies - you feel personally responsible for the pain and happiness of everyone around you, or believe your happiness depends entirely on others. ('It's my fault she's not happy', 'I can't be happy on my own.')

Labelling - you view yourself in terms of your mistakes and perceived shortcomings. ('I dealt with that so badly. I'm a total loser.')

Shoulds, musts and oughts - you are ruled by how you think things 'should be'. You beat yourself up or get upset if this doesn't happen. ('He should know how I am feeling.' 'I must be in a relationship to be happy.')

Blaming - you hold others responsible for your pain or blame yourself for things out of your control. ('It's his fault I've messed up my life', 'If I hadn't let her go, it would never have happened.')

Free yourself

Now that you've seen how your mind can be hijacked, here's how to free yourself from these negative thought patterns.

Step 1: Record what happens

Sometimes negative thought patterns become so automatic, we don't even notice them. Try keeping a thought diary. Whenever you feel upset or distressed or find yourself having unpleasant or disturbing thoughts, write down the following, using the example to help you.

The circumstance - e.g. you see a friend across the street but she blanks you.

What you think - 'she completely ignored me. I must have upset her in some way'.

How you feel - anxious, upset, rejected (rate the intensity of your feelings from 1:10).

How you act - you worry and berate yourself, wondering whether to snub her back or confront her.

When you've written your thought diary, look back at what you've written and see whether you are falling into any of the common mind traps listed above.

Step 2: Be a mind detective

The next step is to challenge your negative thoughts. Remember they are just opinions, not facts. Take a step back and think of yourself as a mind detective. You are gathering the evidence for and against your thoughts, so you can establish the facts and take a more balanced view. Ask yourself:

What evidence do I have for thinking this way?

Is there any evidence that doesn't support this belief?

Are there other ways of interpreting what happened?

To return to our example, you might ask yourself: What are my reasons for thinking this? She walked right past without saying hello. Are there reasons for not thinking this? I can't be sure she saw me. She looked preoccupied and the street was very busy. I can't think of anything I've done to upset her. What does my experience tell me? I don't always see people. I didn't notice my daughter coming up the street the other day because I was looking for my keys. Is there something I'm forgetting or discounting? My friend's just started a new job, so she could have been in a rush or feeling distracted. What would someone close to me say if I told them this story? She was probably in a hurry and didn't see me.

Step 3: Find your balance

Once you have gathered the evidence, use it to write a more balanced statement beside your original thought. Remember, balanced doesn't necessarily mean positive, just rational. In our example, this might read: 'It's quite likely my friend didn't see me, so I'll give her the benefit of the doubt. I'll ring her tonight to find out how she is.'

Step 4: Feel the difference



Now take a fresh look at how you are feeling. If you are still feeling bad, rate the intensity of your emotions from 1-10 and see if it has improved. Decide how you want to act now you are thinking more rationally. In our example, you might decide to text your friend, saying you hope she's ok and her new job is going well. If you have any last minute qualms about this, challenge your fears as before. Imagine the worst and best possible outcomes. At best, you'll get an immediate response that reassures you everything's ok. At worst, if she doesn't respond, at least she knows you are thinking of her, which should make it

easier to resolve any problems.

Practice makes perfect

It's not always easy challenging your thoughts in this way, but it's worth persevering. Even if you don't believe your balanced thought, writing it down will help it seem more real. Keep on practising and you'll be further down the road to healthy thinking.

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