



Negative Thoughts

Learning how to manage negative thoughts can also help to manage your anxiety and low mood.

When people are feeling low or anxious, their thoughts can often be extreme or unrealistic.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) calls these types of thoughts Negative Automatic Thoughts or Nats. As thoughts can influence our emotions, behaviour and vice versa, it is important to learn how to challenge some of our Nats.

Although some people understand that their negative thoughts may not be true, it can be very difficult for people with anxiety or low mood to differentiate between the two and they often take their negative thoughts as fact.

Examples of Nats include:

- “Nobody likes me”
- “Everything always goes wrong for me”
- “If I am late for work, I will lose my job”
- “They think I’m stupid”

What is the difference between a thought and an emotion?

The above are examples of thoughts, usually a statement about something or someone. A thought is usually a sentence or statement. An emotion is a word which describes how we feel, and is usually one word. Examples of emotions include angry, happy, anxious, depressed, etc.

When people are feeling anxious, there are a number of unhelpful thinking styles that they may be using. An example is fortune telling, and usually involves predicting a negative event or outcome for a future event.

Stage 1 - Catching Thoughts

Catching negative thoughts can be difficult as it is probably something that we are not used to doing.



It is quite important to be able to prioritise time to practice catching your negative thoughts. Where there are lots of thoughts, try and identify the thought that causes the most distress or the “hot thought”. When you have the “hot thought” how strongly do you believe it from 0 to 100%?

In order to help you catch your thoughts, ask yourself the following sorts of questions:-

What were you doing?

Who were you with?

Where were you?

What were you telling yourself?

What is the worst thing that went through your mind?

What does it say about you if it's true?

There are also a number of points to bear in mind when you are trying to catch your Nats:-

- They are short and specific
- They occur extremely quickly after the event
- They can occur as words or images
- They do not arise from careful thought
- They do not occur in a logical series of steps
- They seem reasonable at the time



Thought Traps

When catching your Nats, you may also find that there is a theme to your negative thinking.

We call these thought distortions of thought traps. A number of these follow.

ALL OR NOTHING THINKING

- You see things in extreme or in black and white.
- “It is either perfect, or it is a mess”, “My friend likes me or he doesn’t.”

OVER-GENERALISATION

- You see a single negative event as proof that other similar events will turn out the same way.
- If one person behaved in a spiteful way to you, then all people behave in this way.

MENTAL FILTER

- You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it, viewing the whole situation as negative.
- Refusing to notice any positives or anything that went well/you did well.

DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

- You reject positive experiences by insisting they ‘don’t count’ for some reason or another. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.

JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

- You make a negative interpretation when there are no definite facts supporting your conclusion.
- Mind Reading – you conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, but you do not check this out with them.
- Fortune Telling – You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel that your prediction is an already established fact.

MAGNIFICATION (Catastrophising)

- You exaggerate the importance of things, such as, something you may have thought was wrong.
- You inappropriately shrink your achievements or desirable qualities.

EMOTIONAL REASONING

- You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are “I feel like a failure, therefore, I am one”.



SHOULD/MUST STATEMENTS

- You set your self standards of what you perceive you 'should' or 'must' be doing. These standards are often too high and unrealistic.
- The emotional consequence is guilt.
- When you direct should statements towards others, you feel anger, frustration and resentment.

LABELING AND MISLABELING

- This is an extreme form of over generalising. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: 'I'm a loser'.
- When someone else's behaviour bothers you, you attach a general label to them 'he's an idiot'.
- Mislabelling involves describing with language that is highly coloured and emotionally loaded.

PERSONALISING

- You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event, when in fact you did not have primary or any responsibility.

Activity

Have a think about your own unhelpful ways of thinking? Can you recognise a pattern?

My main unhelpful ways of thinking are:

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The next time I notice myself using them, I will try to:

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Activity

In order to combat the negative effects that these thoughts can have on our emotions and behaviours, we need to start by learning how to catch our nats by using a thought diary.

Please look at the example on the next page and then try to complete your own example on the blank 3 column thought diary.



Worksheet 8.1

SITUATION When did it happen? Where was it? What were you doing? Who were you with?	EMOTIONS (0-100%) How intense? (one word) What did you feel?	CATCHING THOUGHTS What bad things might happen? What flashed through your mind? What does it say about me? (0-100%) How intense? What unhelpful thinking style could this be? e.g. Mind-reading, over generalising?
Example: I did not pass my exam today, I was preparing for it for 4 weeks	Anxious 80% Low 100%	I will not get through this year 60% I am no good 60% My parents will be disappointed, my friends will think I'm a loser 75% I am a failure 90%

Stage 2 - Looking for the Evidence



After catching your Nats, the next stage is to challenge these negative thoughts.

The process of challenging these extreme and unhelpful thoughts focuses on looking at the evidence for and against the thought. To help you when you are looking for evidence, you might want to ask questions such as:-

How would someone else think about the situation?

If I wasn't anxious, how would I look at the situation?

Is there any other way of looking at the situation?

How can challenging thoughts help me?

More balanced thoughts will improve your mood and enable you to function better, which will result in enjoying your life again. Opinions or thoughts are what people think. People do not need to have any scientific evidence in order to have an opinion or thought, and just because someone has a thought or opinion does not necessarily make it true. This type of evidence is subjective and therefore difficult to prove.

Factual evidence is much stronger as there cannot be any element of doubt. Factual evidence is objective and therefore very difficult to disprove. When challenging negative thoughts, we need to practice looking for evidence for and against the negative thought. The idea is that we work with the thought which causes the most emotional distress, which is usually the one with the highest belief rating. We then need to create a new alternative thought which is based on the evidence.

The Concept of Blame and Guilt

The impact of fostering and adoption on birth families

Most parents whose children have been removed experience feelings of bereavement, sadness, grief and anger. For most parents, the loss of identity of one's self as a parent is hard to come to terms with and changes in role are difficult to accept (Schofield and Stevenson, 2009; Neil et al, 2010). This is true for birth families of children who have been adopted, as well as those whose children are in foster care.

Birth parents vary in the extent to which they feel a sense of responsibility or blame for their children entering care. Levels of anger and any subsequent sense that it is a good thing for the child will vary also (Schofield, 2009). For example:-



- some parents accept their responsibility and the child's need for care, appreciate the work of the child's foster carer and value social work support
- others may be angry with professionals at the time, but come to accept some responsibility for the problems and see the benefit of care
- some parents who accepted the need for care at the time may now talk more critically of having needed more support, and think the child should now come home
- some parents blame the child for having been difficult to care for and needing to be in care
- others were angry at the time, blamed social workers and did not accept the child's need for care – and they have not changed since. (Schofield, 2009)

From these examples try to consider your current feelings and if you relate to any or perhaps all of the above. How much blame do you feel that you place upon yourself?

For parents whose children have been adopted, the adoption process may compound pre-existing parental difficulties. Their lives may spiral out of control and they are likely to experience intense emotions, such as despair and rage (Neil et al, 2010). Any professionals working with birth parents needs to acknowledge these emotions and the impact they may have on their behaviour and decisions, as birth parents may not be able to contain their anger enough to take in information or participate in important meetings.

Schofield and Ward (2011) use the concept of cognitive dissonance (ie the holding of contradictory beliefs or ideas) to describe how birth parents can be psychologically split – for example, 'I may still legally be a parent but I am not in reality' or 'I have tried my best to be a good parent and I love my children but they have suffered while in my care'. In order to mediate the emotional distress that contradictory feelings and thoughts create, a person often develops an attitude or story that enables them to rationalise what has happened – in this case, to cope with the separation from their child or children.

Some examples expressed by parents during the process of their child being taken into care might include:

'I am a good parent ...

- *... because I was not to blame for my child coming into care (my partner or the social worker was to blame)*



- ... because I always loved my child, even when we had problems or when I was in prison
- ... compared to some other parents, who really hurt their children
- ... but my child was too difficult for even a good parent to manage.'

Expressed since the child had been in foster care:

'I am a good parent ...

- ... because I accept that foster care is best for my child and support the placement and the carers
- ... because I have made positive changes to my life, such as giving up drugs
- ... because I am raising other children successfully
- ... because I remain in a constant state of anger and keep fighting to get my child back.'



Blame, Guilt and feeling responsible often come hand in hand, when we blame ourselves for events going wrong this can often then lead to feelings of guilt.

Guilt and blame are negative words, however responsibility is a positive one. People generally feel good about themselves when they take responsibility for their lives. They feel empowered.

Guilt can also be positive it encourages people to have more empathy for others, to take corrective action, and to improve themselves. Self-forgiveness following guilt is essential to esteem, which is key to enjoyment of life and relationships. Yet, for many, self-acceptance remains elusive because of **unhealthy** guilt – sometimes for decades or a lifetime.

Guilt may be an unrelenting source of pain. You might hold a belief that you should feel guilty and condemn yourself – not once, but over and over – or guilt may simmer in your unconscious. Either way, this kind of guilt is insidious and self-destructive and can sabotage your goals. Guilt causes anger and resentment, not only at yourself, but toward others in order to justify your actions. Anger, resentment, and guilt sap your energy, cause depression and illness, and stop you from having success, pleasure, and fulfilling relationships. It keeps you stuck in the past and prevents you from moving forward.

So remember:-

Nobody is perfect, even our friends or family members who appear to lead perfect, guilt-free lives. Striving for perfection in any part of our lives is a recipe for failure, since it can never be attained.

We all make mistakes and many of us go down a path in our lives that can make us feel guilty later on when we finally realize our mistake. The key, however, is to realize the mistake and accept that you're only human. Don't engage in days, weeks or months of self-blame or battering your self-esteem because you should've known, should've acted differently, or should've been an ideal person. You're not, and neither am I. That's just life.