Managing Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs)

Step 1 – Identifying Your Key ANTs

Although we’re all different, researchers and psychologists have, over the years, identified a number of common mistakes we all make in our thinking.

Automatic negative thoughts (ANTs) are unrealistically negative. They make you feel more anxious, stressed or unhappy than you would otherwise be. They can be a major cause of anxiety and depression.

They are self-defeating and stress producing.

ANTs usually come up quickly, are taken on as truth, are judging, and are out of surface awareness – like background noise - like the radio - you can tune it out or tune in and become aware of it.

ANTs can become a thinking pattern or a belief when we use the same types of thoughts repeatedly over time.

The first step in reducing your ANT is to learn to recognise and label them. They can be difficult to identify if you don’t know what they look like, or if they’re not on your radar to be wary of, so there are categories to help you in knowing what to look out for.
Common Automatic Negative Thoughts - ‘ANTs’
This list can help you to recognise negative thoughts in yourself and in others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Automatic Negative Thoughts</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Filtering</td>
<td>‘I know my boss said good things about the report but I can’t stop thinking about his comment about my grammar.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>All or Nothing Thinking</td>
<td>‘I must be perfect.’ ‘I’m a failure’. ‘This job is so bad. There’s nothing good about it’. ‘The guy is evil.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personalising</td>
<td>Thinking that a general comment to your team is directed to you. Taking passing remarks personally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catastrophising</td>
<td>‘What if I lose my job? Life will be over.’ ‘What if this goes badly? I won’t be able to deal with it.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional Reasoning</td>
<td>I feel x, therefore I am x. Eg ‘I feel like a failure, therefore I am a failure.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mind Reading</td>
<td>‘I know he thinks I’m boring.’ ‘I can tell she doesn’t like me.’ ‘I know he thinks I’m incompetent.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fortune Telling Error</td>
<td>‘I’ll never be able to change.’ ‘It’s not going to work so why bother.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Statements</td>
<td>‘I shouldn’t get angry.’ ‘People should be nice to me.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Magnification/Minimisation</td>
<td>Dismissing your achievements to focus on what you’re not good at. Ignoring praise and focusing on criticism.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Once you have identified the types of automatic negative thoughts that you commonly experience, you can begin to challenge these ANTS to weed them out and plant optimistic thoughts instead.
EXERCISE: IDENTIFYING YOUR COMMON ANTS

Read the brief descriptions of each of the ANTs listed and tick 3 that you experience at work most frequently.

For these 3 write some specific examples of when you have had these ANTs.

It’s normal for these ANTs to occur - it happens for us all - so the point of this exercise is not to judge or berate yourself but to help you become aware of the types of ANTs that are common for you as the first step in changing them to more helpful thoughts.

Becoming aware of your thoughts may be difficult to begin with but gets easier with practice. The more you can do it for yourself, the more you can model it for others and help them to use the same strategy.

My common ANTs are:

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Note that ANTs are not necessarily unhelpful in every situation – sometimes they may be helpful to some extent - to protect you and keep you safe.

The main aim is to question whether your thoughts are helping you or working for you in the particular context. Use your judgment in considering what’s constructive for a given situation. There’s no right or wrong.
Step 2 - Challenging ANTs

We're now going to begin challenging those automatic negative thoughts to weed them out.

Challenging your thoughts involves questioning yourself in the same way that you might question someone else with whom you disagree or have a debate with. You’ve probably used some of these skills when you’ve changed your mind or realised you were biased or prejudiced in some way about something before.

**Possible Challenge Questions:**

1. Is this thought helpful? Is this thinking or behaviour helpful for my happiness or for achieving my goals or is it self-sabotaging? (This is sometimes referred to as goal-focused thinking.)
2. Is this thought realistic? Is my conclusion rational?
3. Am I ignoring something important?
4. What evidence do I have? ('How do I know?') Am I looking at all the facts/evidence? What is the evidence for and against this thought compared with an alternative more helpful thought?
5. Is this an example of one of the common ANTs?
6. Am I focusing on the negatives and ignoring other information? ('That may be true, but there's also X to take into account…')
7. Am I jumping to conclusions without looking at all the facts?
8. Are there any other possible explanations?
9. Are there any other ways of looking at this? Motivations of empathy, understanding and compassion can help with considering what's happening in the other person’s world.
10. How would someone (whom I admire) think if they were in this situation?
11. What is the big picture?
12. Who do I trust that I could talk with to give me a realistic and helpful perspective?
13. Am I being inflexible in my thinking? Am I trying to control something not in my control?
14. Is it as bad as I am making out? What is the worst that could happen and how likely is it that the worst will happen? Put things into perspective – does it really matter?
15. What’s a more helpful thought? What can I say to myself that will help me remain calmer and help me achieve a constructive outcome in this situation?

Remember that the point of thinking optimistically is to enjoy more positive emotions, to cope with challenges more effectively, and to be happier and more confident.
EXERCISE: CHALLENGING YOUR COMMON ANTS

1. Look again at your list of ANT s from the previous exercise. Choose two or three that occur most often for you.

2. Write down how you tend to feel and what you tend to do (or not do) when these thoughts occur.

3. Pick one type of ANT and write down an example of when it caused you distress.

4. Did the ANT lead to a positive outcome or simply make you feel more negative than you needed to?

5. Write down a question that you could have used to challenge the ANT in your example?

If you’re finding it difficult to differentiate between your thoughts and feelings and therefore, what to challenge, write it all down first. Then determine which are your thoughts and which are your feelings – the thoughts are usually the ‘why’ behind what you’re feeling.
EXERCISE: PRACTISING IDENTIFYING & CHALLENGING ANTS

It’s usually harder for us to be aware of - let alone manage - our ANTs and reactions during emotional or stressful times.

Moreover, they often creep up during these times so it’s helpful to plan ahead for situations that we know cause us stress or unhappiness.

To help with this, you can set aside some quiet time to identify:
- stressful situations
- situations that push your buttons
- or that lead you to lose your grace or react disproportionately to the trigger.

Then reflect on your thoughts that come up during these times. Identify the ANTS that normally come up and then challenge them with some of the weeding questions.

That way you’ll be prepared in advance. You’ll be able to mentally refer back to your preparation for helpful self talk.

In setting up this preparation, I recommend doing this as a weekly habit initially and later a monthly habit, until you are able to identify and challenge your ANTS as a matter of habit.

Don’t expect them to completely disappear - you’ll have bad days and good days. They’ll come up because you’re human.

By practising these skills, ANTs will come up less often and with less intensity.

When they do come up, with practice it’ll get easier for you to catch them and challenge them. Just get up and try again.
EXERCISE: REFLECTING ON A RECENT ANT SITUATION

An ANT Reflection

This table is designed to help you reflect on a recent situation that is pretty typical of when one or your ANTs usually comes up. Work through each section below to see what opportunities you have in the future to deal with a similar situation in a different way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
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</table>

**Situation**

*What was happening?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thoughts</th>
<th>What was going through my mind?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings/Actions</th>
<th>eg sad, angry, anxious</th>
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</table>

**ANT Challenges**

*Was the ANT true? Was the ANT helpful? Was there another way of looking at this situation? What would have been a more helpful thought?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feelings/Actions</th>
<th>How might you have felt or acted differently if you had challenged the ANT?</th>
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</table>
Step 3 - Planting Optimistic Thoughts

“The central method for achieving a happier life is to train your mind in a daily practice that weakens negative attitudes and strengthens positive ones.”

Dalai Lama

The next step in optimistic thinking, once negative thoughts have been identified and challenged, is to replace our ANTs with optimistic thoughts.

For increasing happiness and success, we don’t stop at challenging ANTs; we actively plant optimistic thoughts and attitudes. It’s up to us to create optimistic (positive and realistic) thoughts for happiness.

Decades of scientific research shows that the way you think about yourself, your world and your future significantly affects your level of happiness.

Happy people look at the world differently. They look for and focus more on positives and they decide ahead of time that it’s more about how you arrange your mind than about how external circumstances are arranged. We have a choice every moment of every day, to interpret what goes on around us by recounting the difficulties - or to deal with them, move on and be thankful for the positives.

You can train your mind to pick up the positives - in the same way as if you buy a new car you suddenly start noticing the same cars everywhere.

Even the mundane and the tedious can be rich in meaning if seen in a positive light. You’ll find many more positives if you look for them in simple places, for example, in the smile or laughter of another person. If you’re only looking for positives in ‘extravagant’ places or in ‘big things’, you’re likely to be missing many positives. Many happy experiences come from appreciating and making the most of those small daily occurrences that make life wonderful and provide us with opportunities to grow.

The types of thoughts we can consciously plant are ones that:
- are more helpful (for yourself, others and/or the outcome overall)
- are more realistic (therefore offer real, grounded hope)
- focus more on positives and what we’re grateful for
- focus on the solutions and opportunities
- put negative events into perspective
- see challenges as opportunities
- stay open and in the moment.

These lead to generous thinking, words and actions.
Optimistic thinking is not about ignoring the negatives. It’s about continually shifting your focus and attention to the positives which are often ignored. For example, focusing on all the things that have gone right rather than all the things that have gone wrong; on people who care about us rather than on rejections; things we’ve been lucky enough to experience rather than what we’ve missed out on; other people’s qualities rather than their faults.

EXERCISE: RECALLING PAST STRATEGIES YOU’VE USED SUCCESSFULLY

Write down an example of a time in the past where you have successfully challenged ANTs with positive and optimistic counter-thoughts.

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EXERCISE: CREATING YOUR ‘POT’ STATEMENT

Neuroscience and linguistics have shown us that the language we use can have a powerful impact on us so using positive phrases more often can help with this and also with making our thoughts more positive, compounding the cycle of positive thoughts and language.

An easy way to combat ANTs when they come up is to create a positive and optimistic thought (POT) that you can use to counter your ANTs.

What statement or phrase can you create that you can use in the future to boost your mood or interrupt negative thoughts?

Your POT statement could include:

- Identifying personal positives
- Identifying positive aspects of a difficult situation (increasing optimism when difficulties occur)
- Identifying positive aspects of a positive situation (increasing optimism when good things happen)
- Identifying positive aspects of your world in general
- Being positive about the future

Create a sentence or two that will be positive, memorable and meaningful to you. Something that you can easily remember and use to help you stay optimistic in times of challenge.

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