

Managing Unhealthy Thoughts and Beliefs

Do you find yourself responding more to negative things than positive things? You see a photo of yourself and notice everything you don't like or you meet a new group of people and focus on the things you wish you hadn't said. That is called "negativity bias".

As a part of human evolution, "negativity bias" was necessary for survival; allowing humans to scan their environment looking for problems to solve and danger to avoid. It is estimated that 80% of our thoughts are negative. In addition, our brains are wired for memory. A single negative memory reminds us of other negative memories because the connection is wired in our brain. Therefore, attempts to stop negative thoughts can be very difficult. However, we can combat or minimize the effect of negative thoughts with a focus on positive thoughts. This idea is the premise for a field of study known as Positive Psychology. This field of psychology takes a strengths-based approach to building self-esteem, self-compassion, resiliency, hope, gratitude and well-being. To learn more, visit www.positivepsychologyprogram.com or www.thepositivepsychologypeople.com.

Unfortunately, for people dealing with anxiety and/or depression, negativity bias can interfere with the help-seeking process and the development of coping strategies. Learning to identify and manage unhealthy thoughts can minimize symptoms and promote mental health and wellness.



Defining Unhealthy Thoughts: the first step to managing unhealthy thoughts and beliefs is to identify them when they occur.

- *Ruminating* – repeating the same thought or problem without solutions. When people are experiencing challenges related to anxiety or depression, ruminating thoughts are focused on distressing symptoms or may include thoughts of regret, hopelessness and self-criticism.
- *Negative Self-Talk* – using negative words or phrases to talk about self. Such self-talk often reinforces irrational thoughts, is over-critical and promotes low mood.
- *Catastrophizing* – irrational thoughts that something is much worse than it is or believing that something terrible is going to happen despite lack of reasonable evidence to support the belief.
- *Overthinking* – persistent thoughts of something that are usually more harmful than helpful. This may include a significant amount of analyzing and can lead to catastrophizing.



Strategies for Managing Unhealthy Thoughts and Beliefs: the best strategy is the one that works for YOU. Choose 3-4 to try today.

- Mistakes are a part of life – turn them into learning opportunities. Research suggests that a 5:1 ratio provides the best balance between positive and negative experiences. If you are ruminating on a mistake, write it down and identify five lessons you’ve learned from the experience.
- Language matters. Self-criticism, self-blame and other kinds of negative self-talk will be internalized over time. When you find yourself engaging in negative self-talk, turn the language to the behavior. For example, change “I’m so stupid” to “I made a mistake”.
- Get moving – exercise provides a distraction, releases endorphins, boosts physical energy, promotes the growth of neural connections in the brain and releases physical tension in the body. Exercise will also help you sleep which provides its own restorative benefits.
- Let go of what you cannot control. This will take some practice. When catastrophizing thoughts begin to emerge or you find yourself overthinking, ask the question: “Can I control this right now?” Usually the answer is “no”, so you have no choice but to let it go and move on.
- Schedule a worry break. Allow yourself 20 to 30 minutes to think about what is bothering you most. Write your concerns on paper so they are clear and real. Decide what you want to do with the list – throw it out or use it later for a problem-solving exercise. If problems creep into your mind at other times of the day, remind yourself you have scheduled time for worry and let it go.
- Unhealthy thought patterns often make problems seem larger than they are; therefore, it is necessary to break down problems into smaller steps when attempting to overcome challenges. Be sure you are focused on the parts of the problem that you can control, such as feelings, your response and actions that will minimize distress.
- Try mindfulness, meditation or simple deep breathing exercises. Take the time to explore some apps, such as Calm, or videos on YouTube to find a tool that feels most comfortable for you. Meditation and mindfulness can be challenging for beginners. If your mind wanders, be patient and try to redirect yourself back to the exercise. Start off with just a few minutes of practice.
- Happiness is contagious. Do something nice for someone and it will reinforce positive feelings for yourself. It could be a smile, a kind word or volunteering for your favorite cause.
- Practice gratitude. Identify all the things you are grateful for each day.

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