

Changing negative thinking patterns

When bad things happen in our lives, it's normal to have negative thoughts – like expecting the worst, or seeing the worst in people or situations. Negative thoughts like these can be useful during a traumatic or stressful event. But after the event has passed, continuing to have negative thoughts may no longer be helpful. Always having negative thoughts can make you feel bad. And it can stress your body. If you can identify thinking patterns you may have, and challenge the ones that are not helpful, you can open yourself up to new and different ways of looking at the situation, which can help you feel better.

Negative thinking styles

Indicate which of these negative thinking styles sometimes apply to you:

- All-or-nothing thinking: People who engage in this kind of thinking see the world in all-or-nothing terms. Things are either black or white, but never (or rarely) gray.
- Emotional thinking: This thinking happens when what you feel controls what you think. Feelings are important, but your feelings can play tricks on you. In fact, if you are anxious most of the time, your feelings are almost certainly sending you the wrong message.
- Overestimating risk: This happens when you assess the risk associated with a situation as higher than it really is. This way of thinking can lead to feeling a lot of anxiety.
- “Must” or “Should” thinking: These are unwritten rules or expectations for how you ought to behave that are based on myths rather than facts. They are standards that you feel you must or should live up to.
- Self-blame: People who engage in this style of thinking blame themselves when bad things happen. They take responsibility for things they often had little or no control over.
- Expecting the worst: Some people always expect the worst to happen. Many times their fears are triggered by “what if” thoughts.
- Over-generalization: People who over-generalize believe that because something happened once it will happen again and again.

Practice changing your negative thinking patterns

In the left-hand column on the table below, write an example of a thought for each negative thinking style that you selected above.

When you are finished, revisit each thought. In the right-hand column beside each one, write a different, more realistic way you could think about the situation.

All-or-nothing thinking:

A different, more realistic thought:

Emotional thinking:

A different, more realistic thought:

Overestimating risk:

A different, more realistic thought:

“Must” or “Should” thinking:

A different, more realistic thought:

Self-blame:

A different, more realistic thought:

Expecting the worst:

A different, more realistic thought:

Over-generalization:

A different, more realistic thought:

A negative, trauma-related thought

Write a negative thought related to your trauma in the space below:

Identify the negative thinking pattern(s) this thought falls into. Choose as many as your think apply.

- All-or-nothing thinking
- Emotional thinking
- Overestimating risk
- "Must" or "Should" thinking
- Self-blame
- Expecting the worst
- Over-generalization

Change your trauma-related thought

Now write a different, more realistic way you could think about this in the space below:

Here are some questions you can ask yourself any time you need to combat negative thinking:

- Is there any other way of looking at the situation?
- Is there any other explanation?
- How would someone else, like a friend, think about the situation? Or what would you tell a friend who had the thought?
- Am I using all or nothing thinking? Is there a middle ground?
- Am I expecting more of myself than I do of other people?
- Am I overestimating (or underestimating) how much control and responsibility I have in this situation?
- What is the most realistic thing that would happen if my thought came true?
- Do I have other ways of handling the problem?
- Am I overestimating the risk involved?
- Am I predicting the future as if I have a crystal ball?

