

# Reframing your thinking

## Mind-body connection

Our brains are capable of processing hundreds of separate pieces of information every second. This information is processed at multiple levels of consciousness by the brain, the outcome of which produces a thought.

It has been estimated that the human brain has between 50 000 and 65 000 thoughts per day. These thoughts are shaped and conditioned by our past experiences, our perspectives on life and our emotional states at the time.



## Thinking-emotion connection

Positive thoughts give rise to happy, contented emotions and negative thoughts result in sad and depressive emotions. These emotions then affect biological changes in the body. Basically, the quality of our thinking affects the emotions we experience and the state of our physical health.

Therefore, it stands to reason that if we think positive and healthy thoughts, then we'll feel healthy and be healthy. In fact, a considerable body of research suggests that the quality of an individual's thinking impacts on their levels of happiness, health, vitality and quality and length of life.



## Automatic thoughts

Have you ever noticed that "little voice" in your head that always seems to be there, describing your world, creating ideas, forming opinions, making comments or even criticising your decisions, actions or outcomes? This running commentary or "mind chatter" is what we call self-talk or automatic thinking.

Automatic self-talk affects the way we experience life and is coloured by our perceptions, attitudes and beliefs. It affects the way we feel, the decisions we make, and the actions we take. This then affects the way we think about ourselves (self-image) and feel about ourselves (self-esteem). Ultimately, thoughts are either empowering or limiting.

## Positive vs negative thinking

The quality of our automatic self-talk can be viewed in two ways: Optimistic (+ve) or Pessimistic (-ve).

When our automatic self-talk is **optimistic** (positive, complimentary and kind) we generally have good self-esteem, a healthy self-image and we deal well with criticism, setback or disaster. Our problem solving is more effective and our levels of commitment and persistence to a task are higher—which is the foundation for most success.

However, problems arise when our self-talk takes on a **pessimistic** tone (negative, critical and self-abusive). This style of automatic self-talk affects us because we forecast doom and gloom for ourselves, and those around us.

Negative thinking causes us to stop trying and often sees us talk ourselves out of opportunities to succeed before we even start. This is called self-sabotage. Unfortunately, negative self-talk is so powerful it erodes our self-confidence and can lead to anxiety and depression. It also affects our self-esteem and ability to learn.

But do you know what? It's easy to change negative self-talk into positive self-talk. Why? Because negative self-talk is nothing more than a nasty little habit and, through deliberate change and rehearsal, new functional habits can replace old, dysfunctional ones.

## Changing your self-talk

Deliberate, positive self-talk is the fastest and most effective ways to replace the negative "mind chatter" that limits us and makes us feel bad. Positive self-talk (in the form of short, positive statements) reprograms our thinking about ourselves, our abilities, and our situation, which flows on to improve our mood and general sense of well-being.

## Thought monitoring

The first step to changing your automatic thoughts is to start taking particular notice of the themes and emotional tone of your self-talk. Listen out for your internal comments, challenge those comments that are negative, defeatist or abusive, and intentionally and deliberately reframe those thoughts so they are positive, supportive and encouraging.

**Example:** "This assignment is too big, I'll never get it finished".

**Reframe:** "If I relax and focus, break down the assignment into smaller bits and manage my time well, I'll finish by the deadline"; "Just making a start is one step closer to completion".

**Example:** "I've never done something this big before, what if I can't do it"?

**Reframe:** "I love a challenge. This assignment is simply a bigger version of my past successes—time to step up".

**Example:** "I've bombed the exam and now I'm going to fail this subject".

**Reframe:** "It's too early to tell yet, maybe I did better than I expected, let's wait and see".

It is important to note that positive self-talk is not self-delusion. Psychologically, it is known as Cognitive Reprogramming and acts to correct our faulty thinking. Faulty thinking is a bad habit that limits our chances for success and happiness.

## "Silver Lining" thinking

This strategy comes quite naturally to positive, optimistic people. It simply involves seeing each event in our lives in a positive light—always looking for the good in people, situations and events—it's an attitude thing. By maintaining a positive attitude or perspective we inoculate ourselves from negative emotions and bounce back from hardship and disappointment easier. Most importantly, we develop resilience to emotional setback.

## Event–thought–emotion–behaviour

Circumstantial events trigger your thoughts, which then produce your feelings, which may then determine your behaviours. Events do not directly produce your emotions. Rather, it's the thoughts that we have about the event that affects our emotions. These emotions then influence our behaviour. Therefore, appraising things that happen to us using a "Silver Lining Thinking" strategy is more likely to trigger a positive or neutral emotion rather than a negative, upsetting one.

## Practice reframing negative thinking daily

When you notice a negative thought pattern occurring, consciously and deliberately interrupt that thought and replace it with a positive alternative. Good habits require practice, patience and commitment to become well established.

## Positive affirmations

These are short, positive, empowering statements that make things happen. They are truisms about yourself or personal changes you'd like to make.

To make them work, positive affirmations should be:

- 1 Rehearsed regularly
- 2 Phrased positively
- 3 Framed in the present
- 4 Used in the first person – "I" statements
- 5 Focussed on self improvement, rather than compared to others
- 6 Descriptive, action words that generate emotion and feeling
- 7 Accurate, realistic and achievable
- 8 Aimed at developing personal traits, eg concentration, self control, patience etc
- 9 Focussed on eliciting specific behaviours, eg "I manage my time efficiently and effectively now"; "I'm fit and healthy and I really enjoy exercising on a daily basis"; " By setting regular goals and organizing my time I am becoming a more confident student".

## Further information

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## Bibliography

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