

20 QUESTIONS

TO HELP YOU CHALLENGE NEGATIVE THINKING

EVIDENCE QUESTIONS

1. *Am I confusing a thought with a fact?*

The fact that you believe something does not necessarily mean that it's true. Does what you think fit the facts? Would it be accepted by other people? Would it stand up in court, or be dismissed as circumstantial? What objective evidence do you have to back up your thoughts or contradict them?

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	I saw Peter at school today, and he didn't smile at me. I must have done something wrong, something that has upset him.	It is true that he didn't smile at me, but I have no reason to think I have upset him. Maybe he was not happy for some other reason.
Your example		

2. *Am I jumping to conclusions?*

This is caused by not having good evidence for what you are thinking. For example, unhappy people often believe that others are thinking bad things about them. But no-one can read minds. How can you know what others are thinking? You may be right, but do not jump to conclusions. Stick to what you can be sure of. If you don't have enough evidence to be certain, see if you can find out more of the facts before you make up your mind.

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	My friend didn't call me back after I left a message for her yesterday. She must not like me anymore.	All I know for sure is that she did not call me. Maybe she didn't listen to the answering machine, or was not allowed to use the phone last night. I'll ask her when I see her.
Your example		

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION QUESTIONS

3. Am I assuming my view of things is the only one possible?

There is more than one way of seeing any situation. How would you have reacted before you started having problems? How would you react even now, on a day when you're having a good day? How might another person see things? What would your reaction be if a friend told you about the situation that is bothering you? Would you be so worried about another person being in that situation instead of you? How would you like to be able to react?

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	That was a really bad kick, I will never be able to play footy well.	If I wasn't feeling so bad I would be able to forget about my bad kicks and keep playing, just like most of the rest of the team. I'd just keep practicing until I got better.
Your example		

QUESTIONING THE EFFECTS OF YOUR THINKING

4. Are negative thoughts helpful to me, or are they unhelpful?

What do you want? What are your goals? Do you want to overcome your worries, to be happy and to get on with life? Is the way you are thinking now helping you to achieve this or standing in your way?

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	This is hopeless. I should be able to do this by now. I am never going to get the hang of finding different ways to think.	What I want is to feel happier. Thinking this way just makes me feel worse. I can't expect things to change quickly. I have been use to thinking the other way for a while, so its only fair to myself to expect it will take a bit more time to start feeling much happier.
Your example		

5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking this way?

Many unhelpful thoughts seem to have some benefits. That's what keeps them going. For example, they might give you an excuse to avoid things you find difficult. Usually the negatives outweigh the advantages. While the benefits of the unhelpful thoughts might be that they get you out of something difficult, avoiding the problems means it will always be a problem. If so, it may be worth your while to work out new ways of looking at things which will give you the advantages, but avoid the disadvantages of the old way.

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	I must make a good impression with this group of girls.	ADVANTAGE. I'll make a big effort to impress them, and if they like me I will feel great. DISADVANTAGE. If somebody doesn't like me I will feel really bad about myself. Telling myself I MUST make a good impression just puts pressure on me. If I want to relax I need to remember that it is impossible for everyone to like me all the time.
Your example		

6. Am I asking questions that have no answers?

This means questions like "How can I undo the past?", "Why aren't I different", "What is the meaning of life?", "Why does this always happen to me?" and "Why is life so unfair". Brooding over unanswerable questions is a guaranteed way to worry yourself. If you can turn them into answerable questions, so much the better. If not, do not waste time on them. Turn your thoughts towards something more constructive instead.

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	When will I feel happy again?	Nobody can really answer that. Worrying about when it will happen just makes me less happy. I could think about what would make me happy, to get on with life.
Your example		

QUESTIONS ABOUT ERRORS IN THINKING

7. Am I thinking in all or nothing terms?

Nearly everything is relative. People, for instance, are not usually all good or all bad. They are a mixture of the two. Are you using this kind of black-and-white thinking when you think about yourself? Look for the shades of grey.

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	I did that really badly, I might as well give up completely.	It's true that I didn't do that very well. But there were probably some things which were OK. I need to think harder about what was OK so I know exactly which bits I need to do differently.
Your example		

8. Am I being too demanding in my thinking?

Watch out for words like 'always', 'never', 'everyone', 'no one', 'everything' and 'nothing'. The chances are that the situation is in fact less clear-cut than that. Mostly it is a case of sometimes, some people, and some things.

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	Nobody likes me. They all think I'm weird.	If nobody liked me, nobody would talk to me. I do have trouble making friends, but there are one or two people I get on with.
Your example		

9. Do I believe I'm totally bad because of a single event?

Worried people often take difficulties to mean they have no value at all as a person. Are you making this kind of blanket judgement? You are made up of thousands of thoughts, feelings and actions. It is not fair to judge yourself as a person on the basis of any single one. This is especially true when you are depressed or anxious, because you will be biased to notice your weaknesses and faults, and to ignore your strengths.

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	I really made a fool of myself in class today. I'm a total idiot.	I did seem foolish in that English class today. But that was only part of one day, and I didn't do the same stupid thing twice. If I remember how I stopped myself acting stupid after English, maybe I will be able to stop myself next time.
Your example		

10. Am I concentrating on my weaknesses and forgetting my strengths?

When people worry, they often overlook problems they handled successfully in the past, and forget the strengths they have that would help them overcome problems they are experiencing. Instead they focus on failures and weaknesses. It may become difficult to think of a single good quality or talent. It is important to try to keep a balanced view of yourself. Of course there are things you are not very good at, things you have done that you regret, and things about yourself that you would prefer to change. But what about the other side of the equation? What do you like about yourself when you are not sad or anxious? What do other people value in you? How have you coped with past difficulties in your life? What are your assets and resources?

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	Everyone at school thinks I'm a loser. I must really be one. There's nothing I can do to change that.	Things are bad at school now. But not everyone treats me exactly the same way. Maybe I should think about why some people treat me better than others. Maybe it's something about the other people, or something good in me that they are better at noticing.
Your example		

11. Am I blaming myself for something which is not really my fault?

For example, depressed people often blame themselves for being depressed. They may put it down to lack of will power, weakness or inadequacy. They think they should pull themselves together and stop being pathetic. When they find this is impossible, they become very self critical. In fact, depression is a very common problem; at any one time, more than one in ten people are experiencing symptoms of depression. Scientists have been studying depression for many years and are still not sure of what causes it. Depression is genuinely a difficult problem to solve, and blaming yourself for it will only make you more depressed.

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	I must be really weak to have feel depressed all the time.	Weak is only one possible explanation. Maybe there are other things happening in my life which make it difficult. When I think about it, maybe I'm stronger than I think to be able to keep going even though I have problems. Once I feel better I will think very differently.
Your example		

12. Am I taking things personally which have little or nothing to do with me?

When things go wrong, depressed people often believe that it is in some way directed at them personally, or that it has been caused by them. In fact, it may have had nothing to do with them.

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	Jonathan doesn't like me at all, he wouldn't have ignored me like that if he did like me.	Maybe he just didn't see me. Maybe he was thinking about something else.
Your example		

13. Am I expecting myself to be perfect?

People often set very high standards for themselves. For example, they may think they should be able to deal with everything just as well when they are feeling bad as they would if they were feeling fine. This simply is not realistic, and just opens the way to self-criticism and feeling worse. It is just not possible to get everything 100 percent right all the time. If you expect to do so, you are setting yourself up to fail. Accepting that you are not perfect does not mean that you have to give up trying to do things well. But it means you can be realistic, and take how you feel into account when you set targets for yourself. That makes you more likely to succeed. Success makes you feel better, and the next step is then that much easier. Also, it means that you can learn by your difficulties and mistakes instead of

being upset and paralysed by them. Remember; if something is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	That's really bad, I should be friends with everybody in my class.	Not everyone in my class likes the same things, so I can't expect everyone to like me. There is no way I can be the perfect friend to everyone all the time.
Your example		

14. Am I using a double standard?

You may be expecting more of yourself than you would of another person. How would you react to someone else in your situation? Would you be so hard on them? Or would you use praise and encouragement to help them tackle their difficulties? You can afford to be as kind to yourself as you would to someone else. It will not lead to collapse.

	Automatic thoughts	Possible alternative thought
Example	I'm pathetic, I shouldn't get upset by such a small thing.	If somebody else was in the same situation as me I wouldn't think they were pathetic. Maybe I should go easier on myself like I would on them.
Your example		

15. Am I the only person paying attention to the black side of things?

Are you, for instance, focussing on everything that has gone wrong during the day, and forgetting or discounting the things you have enjoyed or achieved?

16. Am I overestimating the chance of disaster?

Depressed people often think that if things go all wrong, disaster is sure to follow. If the day starts badly, for example, it can only get worse. These ideas can act as self-fulfilling prophecies. But how likely is it that what you expect will happen? What can you do to change the course of events?

17. Am I exaggerating the importance of events?

What difference does a particular event make in your life? What will you think about it in a week, a month, a year, 10 years? Will anyone else remember what happened? Will you remember? Even if you do, will you feel the same about it? Probably not.

18. Am I fretting about the way things are, rather than accepting and dealing with things the way they are?

Are you allowing events in the world at large to feed your depression? telling yourself that life is not fair and people are horrible? It is sad that there is so much suffering in the world, and you may decide to do what you can to change things. But getting depressed about it does nothing to help.

19. Am I assuming that I can do nothing to change my situation?

Pessimism about the chances of changing things is central to depression. It makes you want to give up before you even start. But you cannot know that there is no solution to your problems until you try. Is the way you are thinking helping you to problem solve? Or is it making you turn down possible solutions without even giving them a go?

20. Am I predicting the future instead of experimenting with it?

The fact that you have acted in a certain way in the past does not mean that you have to act the same way in the future. If you predict the future, instead of trying something different and finding out what happens, you are cutting off the possibility of change. Change may be difficult, but it is not usually impossible.

TAKING ACTION TO TEST NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

WORKSHEET

PREDICTION (*negative automatic thought*):

REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE:

FOR

AGAINST

ACTION PLAN (*How will I test my prediction?*):

RESULTS (*Imagine possible outcomes from worst to best possibilities*):

CONCLUSIONS (*What have I learnt about myself? How can I deal with situations better in the future?*):

