

In this situation you feel hurt and discouraged. The cancelled lunch date is not the problem. The negative interpretation is the problem. Here's what is happening:

- One possible explanation ("*He doesn't like me*") is assumed to be true, without any real evidence.
- Then this is taken to mean something bigger ("*No one likes me*").
- Then this gets projected into the future. ("*I'll always be alone*").

The feelings of hurt and loneliness are brought about by the "knowledge" that you are unlikable and will never have any friends – even though this probably isn't true.

Could someone go through the same event and react differently? Consider:

Situation	Interpretation	Response
Friend cancels lunch date.	He's probably busy. These things happen to everyone. Maybe next week.	Feel disappointed (but not crushed). Feel a mixture of regret and acceptance. Call back to make plans for next time.

Here the same thing happens, but you don't immediately decide that your friend dislikes you. And you don't make any conclusions about how other people feel. As a result, you respond to the missed lunch date itself (being disappointed) rather than to exaggerated ideas about what the event means.

Notice that even if it turned out that the person *did* dislike you, this would not be a disaster. No one is universally liked by everyone, so it may not be a catastrophe if this one person doesn't like you.



Checkpoint: Checking Your Interpretations

Think of a time recently (preferably in the past week) when you became discouraged or anxious in a big way to a small event. What was the situation?

What was your response? How did you feel and what did you do?

Remember that your emotions and actions are based on your interpretation, not on the situation itself. What were some of the things you thought about the event? What did you think the event meant?

You may have been absolutely correct to interpret the situation this way. But perhaps some of your thoughts were a bit too negative or unrealistic.

If these negative thoughts seem familiar to you, maybe you use them a lot. Most people have certain negative ways of thinking that they use over and over again in different situations.

Now that some time has passed, can you think of any other way of seeing the situation? How could you have interpreted the situation in a way that would be:

- Closer to the truth.
- Less discouraging or anxiety-provoking.

There. You have just completed the core exercise of *cognitive therapy*. Even if it didn't go too well the first time, it's worth practicing over and over again. Eventually it's possible to get extremely good at identifying and correcting our negative beliefs.

Is this the power of positive thinking?

No. This is the power of **realistic** thinking.

The problem is that we all think unrealistically some of the time. The solution is to figure out a more realistic way of seeing the situation and repeat that to ourselves until our emotions begin to respond.

Positive thinking is telling yourself unrealistically positive things. "*Everyone loves me.*" "*I'm the best parent that ever lived.*" This may make you feel better briefly. But it doesn't help in the long run because you soon realize that you are kidding yourself.

To review, here's the strategy for finding and altering negative thoughts:

1. **Situation.** Identify a specific situation that caused your mood to change in a negative way (you got sad, anxious, angry, guilty, or some other negative feeling). Write it down.
2. **Response.** Write down how you felt, and (less essential) what you did about it.
3. **Interpretation.** Write down your thoughts about the situation that led to that response.
4. **Evaluation.** Examine your thoughts to see if they are really true.
5. **Re-interpretation.** Re-think the situation to come up with a more realistic interpretation.

At least...that's the BASIC idea. In the rest of this section, we'll give you some tools to make this technique even more powerful.



Writing Exercise: Monitoring Automatic Thoughts

Negative thinking becomes so automatic we often don't know we're doing it. A friend cancels lunch and we get depressed. We're not aware of thinking about anything at all.

We do lots of things without being aware of them. If you drive, you probably stop for red lights without seeming to think about it. But if you didn't have the idea "*Red means stop*" then you'd drive through red lights all the time. You've used that idea so often that it has become automatic. Similarly, some people have used the idea "*I'm a loser*" or "*People are mean*" so often that they no longer notice they are doing it.

Before you can change your negative thinking you have to know what you are telling yourself. The goal in this exercise is to become aware of automatic thoughts that happen *just before your mood gets worse*.

Carry a sheet of paper and a pen (or some index cards) with you for several days. Whenever you notice your mood taking a dip downward, ask yourself one question:

"What was going through my mind just then?"

Quickly write down the thoughts. If the same thoughts occur again and again, put checkmarks (✓) beside them each time they occur. Keep up the monitoring until it becomes clear which thoughts are the most important or common ones.

Recording your thoughts this way gets easier the more you do it. Don't worry about trying to change your thoughts – at least not yet. The most important thing is to discover what they are.



Checkpoint: Putting Yourself Down

Imagine having someone constantly insult you and find fault with everything you do. Many of us have a critic like this: Ourselves.

Often the insults are repetitive, automatic slogans that we use over and over again, like *"I'm such a loser."* If you say something negative to yourself often enough you will start to believe it, no matter how untrue it is.

Do any of these statements sound familiar? Place a checkmark beside any that you think you use a lot.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm so stupid. | <input type="checkbox"/> I might as well give up. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> No one cares for me. | <input type="checkbox"/> I wish I were dead. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My life is a nightmare. | <input type="checkbox"/> I'm so ugly. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Everything happens to me. | <input type="checkbox"/> I've screwed up again. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> It's all my fault. | <input type="checkbox"/> Nothing will ever work. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I don't have what it takes. | <input type="checkbox"/> This will finish me. |

Do any others come to mind? Write them down.

This week, try to become aware of the ways that you put yourself down. Make a note of the put-downs you use most often. Notice how they affect your mood.

When you have identified your most common negative "slogans", come up with a more fair and realistic slogan to use instead. *"Everyone makes mistakes."* *"I may not like this, but I'll get through it."* *"You can bear this; you already have."*

What's your fair and balanced reply to your most common negative slogan?

When you notice that you are putting yourself down, make a point of repeating this more realistic phrase to yourself. Don't expect that it will "feel true" right away, even if you know it's correct. You've had a lot of practice telling yourself the negative slogan; it will take time before the realistic slogan feels right. If you practice long enough, it will sink in and begin to feel more true than the lie you have been telling yourself.

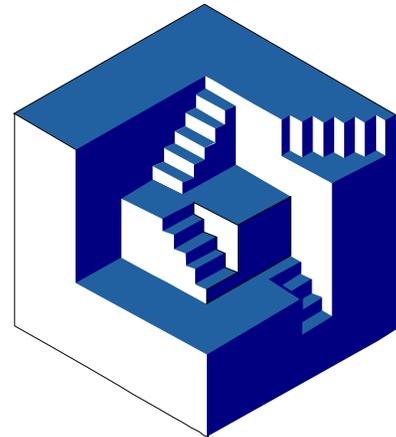
Styles of Distorted Thinking

“This stuff was an eye-opener. I began to see what I was doing to myself...”

“Changing my way of thinking wasn’t always easy. It worked best if I set myself one task a day – like listening for one type of distortion. Then I could do something about it. It helps make you aware that you do have these distortions but you’re not stuck with them.”

If our interpretations are often wrong, or a bit too negative, we might ask ourselves *“How does this happen?”*

Our interpretations are based partly on the situation (what’s happening at the moment) and partly on our understanding of the world based on our background and history. For example, if our bank has been robbed five times while we have been there, we will begin to see banks as very dangerous places. Our history influences us.



There are two main ways that our interpretations can become distorted.

1. Basing the interpretation on faulty assumptions about ourselves, others, or life in general.
2. Interpreting situations in a biased way (for example, by paying more attention to negative aspects than positive ones).

Let's go over each of these ideas in turn.

Faulty Assumptions

As we grow up we develop a set of general rules about how the world works. We realize that if we let go of something in mid-air it will drop downward. We know that if something is glowing red it is probably hot. We learn that it is best to look both ways before crossing a street. These rules get used so often that they become automatic.

Most of our rules, or assumptions, are accurate and useful. They help us to deal with the world. But *all* of us learn a few incorrect rules as well. And sometimes rules that are *usually* true don't work in a particular situation. Because we use the rules automatically, we have trouble adapting to these strange situations. Astronauts take time to get used to the idea that if they let go of something in space it will not drop. When we're in a foreign country we may have a hard time learning to drive on the other side of the road. The old assumptions don't fit, but we find it hard to give them up.

Everyone has at least a few faulty assumptions. But people differ in their life experiences, so their distortions differ as well. How can we possibly hope to identify yours? Well, some distorted beliefs are extremely common. The list on the next few pages gives some of the most common ones. You probably have at least a few of these beliefs. Of course, you probably also have some distorted assumptions that aren't on the list. Most people do.

The challenge is to become more aware of our faulty assumptions so that we can catch them in action. Then we can substitute a more accurate way of seeing things.



Checkpoint: Identifying Your Faulty Assumptions

Here is a list of common distorted beliefs. Read the description of each one to see whether it seems to fit you. The most important question is not whether you seriously believe the statement. You might not believe it when you see it in print, but it could still be affecting you.

Instead, the question is: *Do you act as though you believed the statement?* If you do, then you may be using the assumption – even if it seems like nonsense when you read it. Beside each statement is a space for you to place a checkmark if you think the distortion fits your behaviour.

_____ **Everything I do must be absolutely perfect; otherwise I am a failure.**

This is the core belief of perfectionism. In reality no one is perfect. Most things that most of us do are imperfect in some way. If you need to be perfect to feel good about yourself, you will rarely feel satisfied. In addition, you may be reluctant to try new things, like skiing, writing, or using computers, because while you were learning you would make many mistakes. If you are a perfectionist, try to welcome imperfection in your life. You might even try being imperfect on purpose, to prove to yourself that it isn't the end of the world.

_____ **I must always be at peak efficiency and performance.**

If you have established a personal best of some kind (fastest run, highest mark, most done in a day, best work evaluation), then from that time on you must perform at the same level or better. There can be no slow days, no bad weeks, no low marks. If you don't do your best you think it is a disaster, and that you will continue to slide forever. This belief can be a major barrier for people recovering from depression. Although today they may be at 10% efficiency (a huge improvement over the 2% yesterday), they still are not at 100% and so it doesn't count. If this fits you, try to accept the idea that everyone has good days and bad days.

_____ **Life is fair.**

If you hold this belief you will feel guilty when bad things happen to you. After all, you must have done something terrible to deserve what happened. Work at accepting that the world is not always fair. Then it won't be a shock when unfair things happen.

_____ **If others disagree with me, then I must be wrong.**

Do you usually wait for others to express their view before you express yours? If they have views different from yours do you feel embarrassed or change your opinion? Do you feel that you have a *right* to have an opinion? Having a healthy respect for your own attitudes will allow you to think about and weigh what others say rather than automatically assuming they are correct. (Of course, we're not always right either.)

_____ **I am only worthwhile as long as I am doing something for someone else.**

Do you feel guilty and/or anxious whenever you treat yourself well or take time for yourself? Remind yourself that you are a human being with the full range of human needs and rights. It is important to spend some time caring for yourself. Try turning around a well-known adage: Love yourself as you would your neighbour.

_____ **The way to be accepted and appreciated by others is to give and give.**

Are you always the one who gives more in your relationships? Why? Could it be to buy love and acceptance, to make up for a belief that you are secretly unlovable? What do you expect the other person to do in return? In reality, excessive unwanted giving (of time, favours, or gifts, or always letting the other person make the decisions) often causes others to be resentful and lose respect for you. The solution is, again, to respect yourself as much as you respect others.

_____ **Anger is bad.**

Many of us grow up either suppressing anger or letting it explode outward uncontrollably. Anger is a standard element of the human range of emotions. It helps us recognize when other people are crossing our boundaries, and can give us the strength to defend them (by saying "*no*," standing up for ourselves, and so on). Anger pushes us to take action. We need to be careful not to violate the rights of others when acting on anger. Anger can also seduce us into feeling we are absolutely in the right, when we might not be. But anger can also be a useful signal that we need to stand up for our own rights or the rights of someone close to us.

_____ **Being healthy will mean not having strong emotions.**

In fact, emotions are essential to life. They provide feedback about what we are doing. They motivate us to carry on or change course. Many emotional difficulties seem to arise when people ignore their emotions (for example, when a compulsive worker feels overwhelmed but doesn't act on this by cutting back). Once emotions build up beyond a certain point (as in depression, chronic anger, or anxiety disorders) they stop being helpful. But in their milder forms they are a useful part of life that are meant to be paid attention to and tolerated without alarm.

_____ **I have to do everything I am asked to do.**

If you believe this, you have to rely on other people not to ask you to do anything unreasonable. You won't feel you have the right to defend yourself or say "no." Because of this, control over your life is always in other people's hands. People with this belief feel angry and resentful when others make unreasonable requests, but they go along with those requests anyway. They often feel "used" by others. Although it can sometimes be difficult to set and keep boundaries, you have the right to decide for yourself what you will and will not do.

_____ **I have the power to change people.**

People who believe this may get into relationships because of whom the other person could become, not who they are now. The belief is that by providing a secure, or loving, or educational environment, or by the pure force of your personality, the other person will change (give up drinking, get a career, go back to school, learn to control their temper...). Unfortunately, this seldom works. Instead, you wind up feeling resentful because you've spent all this energy and the other person hasn't changed at all.

_____ **Good relationships have no problems.**

This belief comes from the "*and they lived happily ever after*" myth. The idea is that if you have found the right partner the relationship will never require work and effort. The reality, of course, is that every long-term relationship requires work and effort, and difficulties are not a sign that the relationship was wrong from the beginning.

_____ **It is unbearable when life is not the way I would like it to be.**

Do you find yourself saying "*When this job problem, and that family illness, and this other issue are all resolved, I'll be able to relax and be happy*"? Of course, by the time all those things are over there are three *new* problems to deal with. This belief states that everything in your life has to be going well in order for you to be happy. But think back over the past few years: how often has everything come together in this way? The trick is to *allow and expect* a certain amount of upheaval in your life, rather than defining what it will take for you to be happy.

_____ **It is easier to avoid life's problems than to face them.**

Check your actions to judge whether you use this assumption. Think back over any problems you may have put off recently. How many of them went away or got resolved? Some problems do vanish when you ignore them. But most just get bigger.

_____ **I need someone stronger or more powerful than myself to rely on.**

This belief makes you helpless, because you have to have someone else around to take responsibility for you. In a relationship, this means you cannot take charge or assert yourself because the other person might then leave. How many things in your life are you genuinely and completely incapable of handling? For many people the proof that this idea is untrue is that they have *already* managed without such a person at some point.

_____ **I need other people to be supportive of me.**

It's wonderful to get the firm support of another person. But if we think it is essential, then we have to wait for other people to give that support. Or we have to exert all our energy to *make* them support us. That's a helpless position, because we don't really have control over them. We might *strongly prefer* that other people offer us support, but we don't absolutely need it. The proof: often we haven't had such support in the past, and we survived.



The last few pages provide only a partial list of common irrational beliefs, but you get the idea. After reviewing these, can you think of any other negative beliefs that might play a central role in your own life? Take a moment and write them down.

1. _____

2. _____



Writing Exercise: Catching Your Faulty Assumptions

If you are like most people, you probably have certain faulty assumptions that recur again and again. Every time they come back they affect how you feel. It is important to become aware of these beliefs because they can have a profound effect on your mood.

If you had to pick your number one distorted belief from the last few pages, which would it be? Which one seems to have the biggest impact on your life? Write it out in your own words.

How does it affect your life, exactly? When does it occur, and what are the effects?

It isn't enough just to know the beliefs you are using, though this helps. In addition, you need to challenge the belief when it is influencing you. For example, you might counter the need to be perfect with "*Relax – no one is ever perfect.*" You might counter a belief that you need constant support and guidance with "*I am a capable human being and I can rely on myself.*"

When your most important distorted belief begins to affect you, what could you say to yourself in response? (Work hard on this one: it's important.)

Keep in mind that it is not enough to know, intellectually, that good relationships still have problems, or that you are entitled to your own opinions. If you want to weaken the grip the negative belief has over you, you will have to repeat the revised belief (the substitute you just developed) over and over to yourself, especially in situations in which the negative belief has a big influence on you.



Checkpoint: Biases in Thinking

Faulty assumptions aren't the only problems in thinking. You can start with accurate assumptions and still reach the wrong conclusions if your thinking is biased. The following list describes many of the most common biases. Place a checkmark by those that seem to affect you a lot. After each description there is a reminder that you can repeat to yourself when you catch that bias influencing your thinking.

_____ All-or-Nothing Thinking

With all-or-nothing thinking you see things as being either black or white, never as shades of grey. You are either fat or thin, on the diet or off the diet, smart enough or completely stupid, depressed or happy, competent or incompetent, and so on. The same can apply to others. A relationship can be either perfect or horrible; your brother is either wonderful or monstrous. Result: You miss out on the middle ground, where most situations really fall. Sure you ate a cookie that wasn't on your diet, but that's still better than eating everything in the fridge. Yes you made a mistake, but that doesn't mean you're completely incompetent.

Reminder: Where are the shades of grey in this?

_____ Filtering

Every moment of every day we screen out most of the sights and sounds around us. We have to do this. There is too much information at any one time to understand all at once. The problem comes when you screen out all of the positive and neutral information and only pay attention to the negative things in your life. As a result, your life seems unrelentingly bleak and depressing. And because there are always negative aspects to everyone's life, you will always be able to find negatives on which to focus.

Reminder: I need to pay attention to the whole picture.

_____ Underfocusing

Underfocusing is thinking of too many problems, goals, or demands at once. Perhaps you think of a project you want to complete. That reminds you of another problem or demand, then another, then another until you feel completely overwhelmed. *"I have to clean out the garage, but I also wanted to call about my insurance, and the house is a mess, and the kids are coming home for lunch, and I don't have any food, and I just started the laundry, and I have to get that report done for work...."* Sound familiar? Human beings are only able to think *clearly* about one thing at a time. The goal is to set aside the main stack of demands and focus on the one thing that you are working on. You may find it helpful to write a list of your problems and projects so that you don't have to keep them all in your head.

Reminder: One thing at a time.

_____ **Overgeneralization**

You use a single negative event to come up with a depressing general rule. One rainy day means you won't see the sun for the rest of your vacation. One criticism from your new partner is the beginning of the end of the relationship. One fall and you think you will *never* learn to ride a horse. One missed question and you are bound to fail your English class. Overgeneralization causes people to have restricted lives because of beliefs about what they can't do, don't like, or have to avoid.

Reminder: There are absolutely no absolutes.

_____ **Disqualifying the Positive**

You reject all of the positives in your life by insisting that they "*don't count*" for some reason or other. In this way you can hold onto a negative belief about your life no matter how many positives there may be. The supportive friend you have doesn't count because she's the only one. The accomplishment you made doesn't count because it came about by pure luck. The step you took the other day doesn't count because "*anybody can do that.*" Recommendation: Recognize that the positive things in your life are at least as important and meaningful as the negative things.

Reminder: Positives count – no excuses.

_____ **Mind Reading**

You don't have to ask what someone else is feeling or thinking, or why they did something. You know it by mind reading. "*He's just in it for the money.*" "*She just said that because she feels sorry for me.*" "*He's a bigot – I can tell by the way he looked at me.*" While the interpretations you make are usually *possible*, other possibilities are often missed. Maybe he's in that business because he enjoys it. Maybe she said that because she respects you. Maybe he looked at you that way because you took the parking space he wanted. Mind reading usually leads you to feel too certain about the negative guesses you make. Remind yourself that you don't really know what other people are thinking until they tell you. Want to know what they think? Ask.

Reminder: Stay in your own head.

_____ **The Fortune-Teller Error**

In addition to mind reading, you can also tell the future, and the future looks grim. You anticipate that things will always turn out badly and you feel convinced that your predictions are accurate. You've signed up for a course, but you are sure to fail it. You have met someone new, but he or she will dump you soon. One of the problems with fortune telling is that you can make your predictions come true. If you are going to fail, why study? If your partner will dump you, why put a lot of effort into the relationship? The resulting bad outcome confirms your belief that you can tell the future, and as a result you make even more negative predictions the next time. Remind yourself that you can't tell the future. Try to deal with events in the present.

Reminder: You don't own a crystal ball.

_____ Magnification and Minimization

You exaggerate your own foul-ups and other people's achievements. *"She has her degree – a genius! – and I took the wrong bus the other day – what an idiot."* At the same time, you minimize your own achievements and other people's foul-ups. *"I landed a good job but they must have been desperate to hire; she lost her job but it was probably politics."* This way you almost always come out looking inferior. The problem is that you use completely different standards for yourself than for anyone else. These unrealistic personal standards make it difficult for you to feel good about yourself. If you used the same standards for yourself that you have for others you might find it easier to look good in your own eyes.

Reminder: Use the same scale for everyone – yourself included.

_____ Catastrophizing

You take a relatively small event (a quarrel, a bad haircut, missing your dental appointment) and imagine extreme and horrible consequences that could happen as a result. A mistake making a wedding toast will offend your family for generations. A missed meeting means you will lose your job. Having a brief dip in your mood means that you are on the road to the worst depression yet. Once the problem has been blown up into something huge, you experience an emotional impact as though the entire thing had *really happened* (as though you really had lost your job, for example). Because you focus on the imaginary catastrophe, you fail to cope with the real event (*"Oh, I forgot that meeting. Maybe I should get a datebook..."*).

Reminder: Deal with the event, not with imaginary consequences.

_____ Emotional Reasoning

You assume that your negative emotions reflect things the way they really are. *"I feel it so it must be true."* *"I'm afraid of getting more depressed, so I must be on the way to depression."* *"I feel hopeless, so there must be no hope."* But remember: Your emotions depend on what you *think* is going on, not on what's *really* going on. If you see the situation the wrong way (*"The boss's frown means she hates me"*) you will experience the wrong emotion (fear of being fired). Most people who use emotional reasoning only do it with unpleasant emotions. They never assume that when they feel happy everything must be fine.

Reminder: Don't believe everything you feel.

_____ Labeling

Labeling is a way to make a problem unsolvable by turning a temporary *event* into a permanent *characteristic*. When you make a mistake you *could* focus on the error and how to correct it. Instead, with labeling you quickly attach a negative label to yourself: *"I'm a loser."* It's not that you made a mistake, it's that you have an unchangeable personal characteristic that *causes* mistakes. This brings on helplessness. Labeling can also be used with other people or organizations. When someone's behaviour rubs

you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him/her: "*He's a pig.*" If that's true, the person probably can't change and the problem is now unsolvable. To keep the problem solvable, you must focus on what actually happened.

Reminder: Focus on the event, not on the person.



Writing Exercise: Catching your biases

Most people find that they use more than one of the biases listed on the last few pages. Which one seems to give you the *most* trouble?

You probably don't use this bias *all* the time. Which situations are you *most* likely to distort in this way?

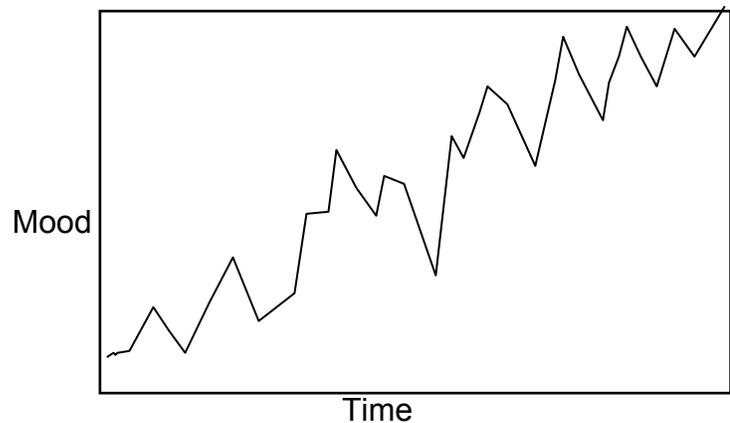
Distortions work best when you're not aware that they are happening. The next time you find yourself in one of the situations you have described above, try to catch the distortion as it happens. Then remind yourself what to do instead (perhaps using the reminder provided). What would be a more reality-based way of thinking in one of the situations you have listed?

Repeat this revised way of thinking over to yourself a number of times. It will probably feel quite artificial at first because you are not used to it. With time it will become more familiar and will begin to *feel* right.

Handling Changes in Mood

People never recover from depression, severe anxiety, or stressful life transitions in a straight line. It is understandable to hope that each day will be a bit better than the last, but usually the mood is up and down, as shown by the graph. Gradually things improve, but there are setbacks along the way. Many people describe it as like being on a rollercoaster.

As your mood changes, there are four principles that you can use to help minimize your setbacks. Each principle relates to a common trap, or pitfall, along the way. Two of these traps appear when your mood is dropping and two appear when you are feeling better. Learning to recognize and avoid them can help speed your recovery.



Dropping Mood Trap #1: Catastrophizing

Everyone's mood rises and falls throughout the day. Most of the time we don't pay much attention. We feel a bit more anxious or discouraged. Then it passes. We don't worry about it.

When you have had a recent bout of serious anxiety or depression, two things are different about this. First, your mood is likely to be more up and down than usual. It takes a while before your emotions even out.

Second, you may get more alarmed than usual by changes in your mood. You might worry that small changes mean *"the problem's coming back"* or *"it's getting worse."* You might picture yourself sinking into a pit of depression, or suffering from an endless panic attack. These ideas can be frightening or depressing to think about, and so your mood *does* get worse. Then it seems like you were right (*"It really is coming back"*), which is even more alarming, which makes you worry more, which makes the mood even worse.

What should you do when you find your mood dropping? Remember that worrying, overinterpreting the drop (*"This means I'm going to feel awful for the rest of the week"*) and resisting the drop (*"Oh, no, I can't feel this way!"*) all tend to make the problem worse. Instead, try to accept the change in mood as a normal part of the recovery process. Recognize that it is not permanent. Then carry on with the other activities you had planned for the day.

Avoid giving in to the mood and becoming inactive, as this will usually only make you feel worse. Focus on tasks that will bring you closer to your goals, or on activities that you normally enjoy.



Meet mood setbacks with acceptance and activity.



Dropping Mood Trap #2: Theories upon theories

Some people respond to depression or anxiety by searching for the causes of these emotions. They come up with theory after theory about why they have the problem. In fact, this can sometimes be useful in preventing the problem from happening again.

During a dip in mood, however, going over all these theories again and again is a bad idea. You probably won't find the single true cause of the emotion. Usually there is no single true cause. Even if you did find it, the emotion wouldn't go away. Instead, the main effect of this kind of thinking is to make the dip worse. A better strategy is to focus on action that will take you in a positive outward direction (such as exercise, social contact, or working toward a goal).



During mood setbacks leave the past alone.



Well, fine. It's easy to see how drops in your mood might trap your thinking. But how could feeling better trap you? Wouldn't you just enjoy it? Unfortunately, feeling better can be just as difficult as feeling worse! Let's look at two Rising Mood Traps.



Rising Mood Trap #1: Mood Checking

Imagine that for weeks you have had a sore shoulder. One day you notice that you haven't had any pain for a while. You will probably try to produce the pain by stretching or prodding that part of your body. Your idea is that if the pain comes back, the injury needs more time to heal. If you cannot produce the pain then you must be cured.

It is only natural to adopt the same strategy when you have been feeling depressed or anxious. Imagine that one day you realize you are feeling better. This is the improvement you have been hoping for. You want to know that it is permanent – that you couldn't feel terrible again even if you tried. To test it out, you think about the most negative aspects of your life. Sure enough, you begin to feel worse. Does this mean that you are really still depressed or anxious "*underneath it all?*" No. In this case, what works for the body does *not* work for the mind. Being better won't mean that you *can't* make yourself miserable, only that you *don't* do so.



If depression or anxiety isn't there, don't look for it.



Rising Mood Trap #2: Enthusiasm

Mood problems rob you of energy and enthusiasm. Often you don't feel like doing anything. In order to get your enthusiasm back, you need to reduce your expectations of yourself and set easy, step-by-step goals. Succeeding at these small goals builds your motivation and interest. But then, when your enthusiasm begins to come back, you may fall into a trap. Your eagerness to get better may tempt you to forget all about easy, step-by-step goals and jump to much bigger goals that are beyond your reach. One person in a Changeways program found that she could finally concentrate for a half-hour at a time and immediately signed up for full-time university!

If you overcommit yourself too early and try to do far too much, you will probably feel overwhelmed and your mood may sink. The thing to do is to scale back your expectations (*"Uh, I've decided not to host that dinner party for 60 after all"*) and go back to the step-by-step process. To avoid the trap altogether, celebrate the return of your enthusiasm, but don't let it get away from you.

By the way, if you fall into this trap you are in good company. Most people do it at least once.



When your enthusiasm returns, keep it on a leash!



Seeing the World Through Blue-Tinted Glasses...

You may have noticed that depression can affect not only how well you remember, but *what* you remember. This is called the **mood-congruent memory bias**. When you are depressed you will find it easiest to remember those times in your life when you have felt sad or discouraged. Times when you have felt happy and confident are harder to remember and may seem less real to you. Consequently:

- Formerly happy memories may now seem false, mistaken, or "unreal."
- It is easy to overestimate how much of your life you have felt down or depressed.
- You may think that you have always been depressed "underneath."

Any of these ideas may be true. But they may also be the product of the shift in memory that commonly occurs during depression. Similarly, when you look ahead your mood may make the future seem more negative than it really will be.

The same effect seems to operate with other emotions. You have probably noticed that when you are angry it is easy to remember all the other times you have been angry at the same person. And when you are anxious you tend to remember other times when you have been fearful or when frightening things have happened to you.

Overcoming Negative Thinking

Hopefully by now we have convinced you that everyone distorts their perception of the world to some extent, and that this has consequences for how we feel. But what do we do about it?

There are lots of strategies for overcoming negative patterns of thinking. In the next few pages you will find descriptions of six of the most useful ones.

Simple Awareness

Thought distortions are extremely powerful, in part because they may have been operating for so long that they have become automatic. They often happen outside our conscious awareness. Increasing our awareness of our most common distortions can help in two ways:

1. Whenever you become aware of an automatic process, it becomes less efficient. When experienced typists watch their hands and concentrate on moving their fingers their speed slows down considerably. What is bad for typing is good for thinking, because you *want* to disrupt negative automatic thoughts.
2. When thoughts occur outside your awareness you cannot bring your critical mind to bear on them. It is like signing papers that come across your desk without reading them. How would you know they didn't contain errors? Increasing your awareness of your most common distortions can help you to examine your thoughts for errors, mistaken assumptions, and biases.

The strategy is to notice the shifts in your mood, and use negative emotions as your signal to say *"What was going through my mind just then?"* Then repeat your reasoning to yourself. *"I forgot her name for a moment. So now she's going to hate me. And she'll tell everyone she meets about it and they'll hate me too. And they will be right, because only complete idiots forget the names of their friends. So I'll be alone forever, and that's what I'm so sad about."*

The distortions in the thinking are often so obvious that the reasoning begins to fall apart on its own. It becomes hard to believe in the negative thinking. The negative emotions begin to fade as well. It's almost as though someone has said *"We're not letting that bad reasoning get to the emotions. Cut off the power!"*

Thought Challenging

Sometimes simple awareness isn't enough. You spell out your negative thinking and it still seems real to you, or still pulls at your emotions. For these times you need something more powerful than just awareness. That's what thought challenging is for. This is the technique we introduced at the beginning of this section. Page 21 provides a form that you can use to practice challenging your negative thoughts. You have our permission to photocopy this form as much as you like for your own use.

Note: *Thought challenging always works better if you do it on paper.* Eventually you should find that you can challenge some of your negative thinking in your head, without writing anything down. But use pen and paper for now. And when you face difficult situations that are hard to figure out, pen and paper will always be more effective than just thinking it through.

Here's how to use the form:

1. **Briefly describe the situation.** Even though some situations come up again and again, you will find the technique works best if you think about a particular instance. So *"Argument with daughter over car on Tuesday"* is better than *"Arguments with daughter,"* even though the arguments happen quite often.
2. **Describe your response.** How did you feel? What did you do?
3. **What was your interpretation?** Write down your automatic thoughts about the situation. *"No one in this family pays attention to me." "I'm helpless to do anything about it anyway." "I'm a terrible parent."* If you're not sure what your thoughts were, then guess. Ask yourself what might cause someone else to feel this way in that particular situation. If you begin feeling the way you did at first, you may have discovered your own automatic thoughts.
4. **Evaluate your thoughts.** Are they accurate? Do they consider the *whole* truth? Use the lists of Faulty Assumptions and Biases in Thinking to see if any of them might be distorting what you think. It can be useful to rate each thought on a 0 (completely wrong) to 100 (absolutely true) scale.
5. **Re-interpret the situation.** For each automatic thought, come up with a replacement thought (The Truth) that is more fair and balanced. *"They do pay attention, though not as often as I'd like." "It's my car, I get to decide who borrows it." "Teenagers are difficult to deal with sometimes."* Note that you can even do this with automatic thoughts that are 100% true. *"It really is true that she's mad at me about this; but I've handled her being mad before."*

The Distancing Technique

Is it difficult to come up with replacement thoughts? This is a common problem caused by being too involved with the situation. Imagine that a very good friend has just gone through the same situation and is having exactly the same automatic thoughts. What could you say to help your friend see how distorted the ideas are? What would you suggest as an alternative way of looking at the situation?

Notice the temptation to say *"Yes, but that's them. It's not as bad for them, and those negative thoughts really would be wrong in their case, but they're true for me!"* What's often happening here is that you are holding yourself to a harsher standard than you use for other people. Consider what your friend would probably say if you told them your automatic thoughts. Perhaps that's exactly what you would tell them.

It is not enough just to come up with the more balanced point of view. **You will have to repeat The Truth to yourself over and over again.** How many times have you repeated the negative script to yourself? You may have to repeat the realistic script almost as often before it begins to help.

- One strategy is to stand in front of a mirror and talk to yourself out loud. You may feel a bit silly, but the results are worth it.
- Another technique is to write the realistic thoughts down on a piece of paper and carry it around with you. Read it over any time you find yourself in a similar situation.

Whichever strategy you use, the balanced view will seem false and artificial for a while. That's because you are more used to the automatic negative thoughts. With time and a lot of practice the balanced view begins to feel more natural. At this point, your emotional response to the situation begins to improve.

Worrying Time

Do you catch yourself worrying about your problems throughout the day? Worrying time is designed to help you stop *most* of this worry by saving it for a particular time. This can be easier than stopping the worry altogether. As well, you may *have* to think about some of your worries in order to decide what to do about them.

Here's the strategy:

1. Pick at least two periods during the week (it could be up to one a day) when you agree to worry. Each period should be between 20 and 60 minutes, and it should be at times when you will not be distracted. Make appointments with yourself to do this. Write them into your date book if you have one.
2. Carry a pen and paper (index cards work well) with you *at all times*. When you catch yourself worrying, make a note of the topic. Assure yourself that you *will* think about the issue, but not right now. And because you have written it down, you don't have to worry that you might forget. Shift your mind onto something else.
3. When it is time to worry, take out your list of topics and consider each of them in turn. With some topics you may find that you can actually come up with a solution or a decision about how to handle them. Others you may just worry about.

This strategy may sound a bit odd, but it can be surprisingly helpful if you are disciplined at carrying it out. You may find that you actually begin working on some of your problems instead of just worrying about them. And at minimum you can shrink the amount of time that you lose by worrying.

Facing the Worst

You're driving across town to your dental appointment. You're late and the traffic is bad. You are feeling more and more anxious. You are sweating, your hands grip the steering wheel tightly, you feel your stomach cramping, your heart rate is rising. You have that familiar stressed-out feeling.

The stress response is designed to save your life. It should switch on when your life is in danger. But many of us get stressed several times a day. Is life really all that dangerous? And if we get stressed, will that really help?

When you are stressed or anxious, you are usually telling yourself, *"This is big trouble; I'm not sure I can handle it."* But often the situation isn't really all that difficult or threatening. Once we realize that, we can let go of some of the anxiety.

Facing the Worst is designed to help. It involves making a habit of asking yourself two questions when you feel stressed:

1. What's the worst thing that could happen?

"I'll miss my dental appointment."

2. Could I survive that?

"I don't want to miss the appointment. It would be inconvenient and embarrassing, and I'd only have to go back again next week. Maybe the dentist will think I'm unreliable and maybe I won't know what to say.

"But would I survive? Yes, I'd live. I'm not really in danger."

Then you can relax a bit.

You might notice a part of your mind objecting: *"My problems are much more severe, and there really are negative consequences if things go wrong."* Facing the Worst won't help with everything. But try it when you feel anxious, especially in situations you wish you could handle better. It's surprising how often you realize that you are not in any real danger. And when you remind yourself of that fact, the anxiety declines.

Worry to the End

Sometimes when we worry we play out a mental movie of the terrible event – right up to the worst possible moment. Then we start again.

I walk into my boss's office. It's time for my work evaluation meeting, and I'm nervous. I know I haven't been doing my best work lately. She's sitting there, looking severe. She starts reading the report out loud and it lists my failings over the past six months. Eventually she puts the report down and tells me I'm fired. ...And then I'm walking into my boss's office. It's time for my work evaluation meeting...

It's as though the worst possible moment ("*...she tells me I'm fired*") is a brick wall, the end of the story. We go back to the beginning, play the movie until that moment, and then start again. The anxiety gets stronger, partly because we fear hitting that brick wall. There's nothing beyond it.

But what if you were to keep the movie going?

I'm fired. She tells me I have to gather my things and be out of the building in an hour. I walk past my coworkers, feeling humiliated. I get a box, gather my belongings, and leave. It's a relief to get out the building. I go home and make myself some tea. Days later I begin to realize that I wasn't really happy in the job. I'm not glad I was fired, but there are other things I can do. I begin to make a plan to look for a new job.

Here we move past the worst moment (the boss saying "*You're fired*") and keep thinking about what comes next. There are some bad moments. We have to walk past our fellow employees, who *haven't* been fired. We leave, and feel somewhat better. We go home, having survived the ordeal. Eventually we begin planning what to do next. It turns out that getting fired isn't really a brick wall. It is a stressful event. But it isn't the end of the story. Life continues.

Note that in Worry to the End we don't try to tell ourselves unrealistically positive stories. "*On the way out of the building, someone offers me a great new job.*" "*I pick up a lottery ticket and see that I've won.*" Instead, we try to think realistically about what would come next. Some of it will be negative. But we will realize that even if the feared event happens, there are things we could do to cope. And by facing the negative thought (for example, of being fired), it becomes less powerful. It's just a thought. Just an image. And images cannot hurt us.

Worry Inflation

Our fears often seem to *want* to get bigger. Is there any way we could use this force to help ourselves?

Yes. In Worry Inflation we don't try to tell ourselves The Truth. We go in the opposite direction, making our problems as big as possible. Why? Because if you exaggerate many fears they eventually become ridiculous. You find that you can't really believe that things will get that bad, and the problem shrinks back down to realistic proportions.

Note: Worry Inflation can be used for most of the things most people worry about. But some worries (such as concerns about significant health problems) don't get ridiculous if we make them more extreme. For these worries you need to use one of the other techniques in this section.

Here's the strategy for Worry Inflation:

- First, identify the disturbing thought you want to deal with.
- Next, decide whether inflating the worry will make it seem silly or will only make it worse. Hint: Most worries about social situations are good picks for Worry Inflation.
- Exaggerate the disturbing thought out of all proportion. Imagine the most extreme consequences possible, with an emphasis on the ridiculous. If you fear that people will not like your presentation at a business meeting, imagine that they pull tomatoes from their briefcases and pelt them at you. At first, you may find that the anxiety gets stronger. Keep exaggerating. Eventually your fantasy will be so extreme that it begins to seem ridiculous. Your belief in your worry declines and you begin to feel less anxious.

Here's an example:

"I go on the date but I can't think of anything to say. The woman I'm with is completely bored, so bored that she can barely stay awake. She tells someone in the restroom about me, and they tell everyone else in the restaurant how dull I am. They all stare at me. At the table next to us is a newspaper reporter doing a story on bad dates. He gets a picture of me and writes a story with the headline 'Worst date of the year.' It's published on the front page, and everyone can see me looking idiotic. They use the article in their advertising, and my face is on every bus shelter in the city..."

Eventually the anxiety dissolves and you develop a firm sense that *"No matter what happens, it won't be quite as awful as that"* and you begin to relax.

Once you have developed your extreme fantasy, repeat it whenever you begin to worry about that topic.



Checkpoint: Retraining Negative Thinking

The last few pages have described six strategies for retraining negative automatic thoughts. Which of these strategies seems most appealing to you?

Is there one issue or negative thought pattern in particular that you would like to change? What is it? What starts it up? What keeps it going? Describe it as completely as you can.

How could you use the strategy you have selected with the issue above? What's the plan?

Each of the techniques takes practice, so you may want to focus on one at a time.

Once you have mastered one technique, you may want to learn the others. The more coping techniques you have, the better you will be at overcoming the negative scripts that influence your life.



Suggested Reading about Changing Negative Thinking

Burns, David D. (1989). The Feeling Good Handbook. New York: Plume Books. An extremely successful self-help book on depression and anxiety. The emphasis is on specific exercises to carry out, especially involving negative thinking.

Greenburger, Dennis, & Padesky, Christine A. (1995). Mind Over Mood: Change how you feel by changing the way you think. New York: Guilford Press. An excellent workbook on cognitive therapy.