

# Thoughts

## Different thoughts

There are two kinds of thoughts: voluntary thoughts and automatic thoughts. Voluntary thoughts are the ones you consciously control. You use them when planning, solving problems, or thinking about something that has happened. Voluntary thoughts require focus and use more mental energy. Automatic thoughts work differently. They come quickly and on their own. They can be positive, negative, or neutral, and often influence your emotions.

It is important to be able to distinguish between voluntary and automatic thoughts. This makes it easier to understand and manage both emotions and behaviours.

## Negative automatic thoughts

Negative automatic thoughts appear quickly and often feel true, but are rarely based on facts. They are often exaggerated, one-sided and can make you feel bad. For example: If someone doesn't respond to a message right away, a negative automatic thought could be that they don't like you. But in reality, the person may just be busy or not have seen the message yet. Negative automatic thoughts can make you feel worse and increase feelings such as depression, anxiety or stress.

## How negative automatic thoughts affect emotions and behaviours

There is a connection between negative automatic thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. It becomes a vicious cycle: the thought affects the emotion, the emotion affects the behaviour, and the behaviour reinforces the thought.

Example 1

**Situation:** I make a mistake at work.

**Negative automatic thoughts:** I'm so bad at my job. Everyone else is much better than me.

**Emotions:** I feel like a failure and depressed.

**Behaviour:** I lose motivation and avoid my work tasks.

Example 2

**Situation:** I'm not invited to a friend's party.

**Negative automatic thoughts:** Nobody likes me. I am a bad friend.

**Emotions:** I feel alone and unwanted.

**Behaviour:** I don't want to socialise with other people and avoid social situations.

By identifying negative automatic thoughts, you can manage your emotions and behaviours more effectively.

## You are not your thoughts.

By learning to understand and change your thoughts, you can break negative thought patterns and gain more control over your well-being. When you recognise that thoughts are just thoughts and not facts, their negative impact decreases. Recognising thoughts in this way can improve your well-being. You are not your thoughts and they do not have to control how you feel or what you do.

## Thought traps (cognitive distortions)

Thought traps are thoughts that trick the brain. For example, you might:

- Expect the worst to happen.
- Jump to quick conclusions.
- Assume you know what others think about you.

Thought traps can feel true, but they are not. They can make you feel worse or cause you to misinterpret a situation.

They often involve several negative automatic thoughts. When you learn which thought traps you tend to get caught in, it becomes easier to break the pattern where thoughts, feelings, and behaviours negatively influence and reinforce each other.

Here are some common thought traps.

- **All-or-nothing thinking** I see things as either completely good or completely bad, with nothing in between.  
For example: If I don't succeed at everything I do, I am a failure.
- **Catastrophising** I expect the worst.  
For example: If I make a mistake at work, I think I will get fired. And if I get fired, I don't think I'll be able to handle it.
- **Jumping to conclusions** I draw quick conclusions without thinking it through or checking if they are really true.

For example: She didn't say hello to me, so she must dislike me.

- **Mind reading** I think I know what others think about me, even though I don't know if it's true.  
For example: I could tell from the expression on his face that the person didn't like my presentation.

- **Emotional reasoning** I believe something is true just because it feels that way. For example: I feel worthless, therefore I am worthless.
- **Overgeneralisation** I draw broad and negative conclusions from single events. For example: I got rejected on a date, so I'll never date anyone again.
- **Personalisation** I blame myself for things that are not actually my responsibility. For example: Someone yawned during my presentation. I thought I was boring, but maybe the person was just tired.

### **Exercise: Identifying negative automatic thoughts**

Now you can start practising identifying your thoughts. Sometimes thoughts can be difficult to detect because they appear quickly and only as short words or images. When a distressing thought arises, try to notice it without getting caught up in it. Imagine observing it from the outside, like seeing it on a screen in front of you. You don't need to believe the thought, and try not to judge yourself for having it.

Example

I gave a presentation at work. I stumbled over a few words and lost my train of thought once. Afterwards, I felt like a failure and stressed. Then these negative automatic thoughts appeared:

- I can't handle giving presentations.
- Everyone noticed that I embarrassed myself.

I fell into the traps of overgeneralisation and catastrophic thinking.

### **Exercise: Identify your negative automatic thoughts**

Choose a situation that triggered a negative feeling and describe the situation. Think about where you were, if anyone else was there, and what happened.

What thoughts emerged? It can be words, memories and images.

Did you fall into any thought traps? If so, which one?

## Exercise: Start thinking more flexibly

To change the way you think, it is important to accept that negative thoughts are normal and that they will arise. Everyone has these thoughts from time to time, especially during periods of stress, low mood or worry.

Thoughts can feel very real, but that does not mean they are true. In this exercise, you will practise examining your thoughts and gently questioning them. It is not about suppressing the thoughts, but about exploring whether there are other ways of looking at the thought. It may feel unfamiliar and difficult at first, and that is completely okay. You are learning something new.

1 A negative automatic thought I often have is:

2 How likely is it that this will actually happen?

3 How accurate or realistic is this thought?

4 What evidence supports this thought, and what evidence goes against it?

5 Are there other possible explanations or ways of understanding the situation?

6 How strongly do I believe this thought right now?

7 If the thought were true, how could I cope or respond?

8 If the worst happened, would I be able to handle it?

**Exercise: Find alternative interpretations**

You will now work on finding alternative interpretations of your negative automatic thoughts.

Example

**Negative automatic thoughts:** I will fail the task. My boss will be disappointed and criticise me.

**Alternative interpretation:** I am doing my best on the task and can ask for help if I need it.

Asking for help shows that I take the task seriously and want to improve.

**Thoughts: Find alternative interpretations**

In the previous exercise: Start thinking more flexibly, you chose a thought. Use the same thought in this exercise.

My negative automatic thought:

Describe an alternative interpretation of your negative automatic thought:

## Common difficulties when working with your thoughts

When you work with your thoughts, strong emotions can sometimes take over. This can make it difficult, even if you know the thought is not true. This is common and completely normal. Here are some common difficulties and tips on how to deal with them.

- **Emotions overpower reason**

Sometimes feelings feel stronger and more real than reasoning. Even if you know a thought isn't accurate, it can feel very true because of the emotions it triggers. Ask yourself: does the thought become more true just because it provokes strong emotions?

- **Negative thoughts that have become a habit**

If you have thought a negative thought many times, it can start to feel true simply because you are used to it. If you practise often and don't give up, you can train your brain to think differently.

- **The body's reaction to negative thoughts**

Negative thoughts can affect your body and make you feel stressed. You may experience heart palpitations, tense muscles, or difficulty breathing. These are completely normal and harmless reactions to stress, but the reaction can reinforce the feeling that the thought is true. Consider whether it is your body that is tricking you into believing the thought.

- **Looking for evidence that confirms your thoughts.**

If you often have a negative thought, you tend to notice things that support it. For example: if you think no one likes you, you pay extra attention when someone doesn't say hello. It can help to also practise noticing things that contradict the negative thought.

- **Suppressing thoughts**

Sometimes it feels easier in the moment to try to ignore or suppress difficult thoughts. The downside is that you don't get the chance to examine whether the thought is actually true. This can cause the thought to come back even stronger. Instead, try to put your thoughts into words, for example by writing them down.

- **Self-criticism against negative thoughts**

Being self-critical means that you think negatively about yourself. If you judge yourself for having negative automatic thoughts, it can create more stress and reinforce the thoughts. Remember that thoughts are just thoughts and not facts. Practice being kind to yourself: It's okay that I'm thinking this way right now. That doesn't mean it's true and the thoughts don't define who I am.