

Five Steps for Declaring Independence from Negative Thinking

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We all have negative thoughts from time to time. But some of the most destructive negative thoughts we have jump into our minds so quickly and reflexively that we barely notice them, even though we definitely feel the negative emotions they trigger.

Aaron Beck, the founder of cognitive therapy, described these with the term "automatic negative thoughts." Others call them "inner critics" or "unhelpful thinking" but the label doesn't really matter. What matters is reverting these Automatic Negative Thoughts – or ANTs - from spinning into unproductive cycles of negative thoughts and emotions.

Step 1: Identify your ANTs & triggers

Different people have different Automatic Negative Thoughts. So the process of overcoming negativity requires some introspection and begins with identifying your unique ANTs. ANTs are generally triggered by specific situations, so identify situations that upset you, and try to pinpoint your immediate reaction.

For example:

- In response to a professional setback, some will automatically think: "I'm a loser."
- After a romantic disappointment, others instantly assume: "I'm unworthy."
- After a failed attempt to make life changes, some will say "I fail at everything" or "I'll never be able to get thin/stop smoking/start my business, etc."

After identifying your habitual negative thoughts, and the situations that trigger them, then recognize the negative effects your ANTs have. Most people find that their negative thoughts trigger broader patterns of negative emotions, counter-productive behaviours, and additional negative thoughts.

Step 2: Focus on managing your ANTs, not eliminating them

Automatic Negative Thoughts are automatic largely because they have recurred many times over many years. Indeed, they often got their start with intense emotional experiences from childhood or adolescence. So don't expect them to disappear overnight.

Of course, it would be great to eliminate negative thoughts completely, but for most people, that's an unrealistic expectation. Indeed, anyone who promises to eliminate negativity forever is probably selling self-help snake oil. However, it is certainly possible to manage your ANTs, and although they might still occur from time to time, the research is very clear that you can learn to prevent ANTs from spinning into downward spirals of negative thoughts and emotions.

Certainly there is some value in reviewing the past to understand how your ANTs got started. But the key to managing ANTs is to recognize that they now have a life of their own, and the path to resolving them lies primarily in the here and now.

We've all seen movies or TV shows in which someone suddenly figures out the origin of a specific negative thought or psychological problem, and then has an immediate and dramatic recovery. That's certainly convenient for a TV show that needs to have everything neatly wrapped up by the end of the hour, but that's not really how the mind works. There are some effective ANT-management techniques that we can use, but they will require some effort and practice.

Step 3: Observing your ANT

This step begins with an insight from Buddhism: the inner monologue that has been cycling through your head since you learned to talk is not "you." In a sense, "you" are the listener rather than the voice itself.

As the listener, you can shape the nature of that internal monologue, and choose to listen to a more positive voice. Most importantly, you can learn to prevent that little voice - those isolated thoughts - from spinning into full-blown cycles of negative emotion and counter-productive actions.

When an ANT occurs, try to observe it objectively. Just because you have "heard it," doesn't mean that you have to believe it, or give into it. Recognize that this thought occurred to you, and let it go. Ride out the thought like a surfer riding a wave. If this technique appeals to you, you may want to explore meditation in more detail, as many meditative techniques are focused on this type of "impartial observation" of thoughts.

Step 4: Just stop it

Try carrying a 3x5 card with the word "STOP" written on it. When your ANT pops into your head, pull the card out and spend some time looking at it. Another alternative - wear a rubber band around your wrist, and snap it when your ANT occurs.

This technique may seem simplistic and "self-helpy." Certainly it is no magic bullet to eliminating your ANTs forever. But it will help you become more aware of your ANTs, the situations that trigger them, and most importantly, your ability to consciously prevent your ANTs from spinning out of control.

And it is good preparation for our fifth and final step . . .

Step 5: Learn to argue with yourself

The final step in our process of ANT-management requires going on the counter-attack. Fight back against the negative thoughts by asking yourself a series of questions that will reveal the ANTs as false and counter-productive.

Try asking yourself these seven kinds of questions:

- **Evidence:** What is the objective evidence for this ANT?
- **Exaggeration:** Is this ANT an exaggeration?
Am I over-reacting?
Am I over-generalizing?
- **Alternatives:** What are some other possible explanations?
- **Flexibility:** Can I evaluate this situation in more flexible terms?
Am I thinking in overly rigid, black-or-white, all-or-none terms?
- **Utility:** Is this belief empowering or counter-productive?
- **Comparison:** How have others fared in similar situations?
- **Role reversal:** How would I evaluate other people who performed as I did?

For example:

Suppose you don't complete a certain project on time, and as a result, you find that you are calling yourself a loser. Try challenging this ANT by asking yourself questions like:

- Does not finishing my project on time really indicate that I am a loser? Haven't I completed lots of other projects on time? (Evidence)
- Isn't "loser" a little strong? (Exaggeration)
- Is it possible that I didn't finish my project on time because I didn't have the resources I needed? (Alternatives)
- Just because I may have room to improve my project management skills, does that really mean I'm a loser? (Flexibility)
- Does it really benefit me to think of myself as a loser just because I was late with one project? (Utility)
- Did everyone else finish their projects on time? (Comparison)
- Would I consider everyone who didn't finish their projects on time a loser? (Role reversal)

At first, this process of "arguing with yourself" will probably seem forced and artificial. But research has shown that, with practice, this technique can be an effective technique for managing the negative thoughts and emotions that undermine confidence. In fact, this technique is the basis for cognitive-behavioural therapy, pioneered by Dr. Aaron Beck, and rational-emotive behaviour therapy, pioneered by Dr. Albert Ellis. Both types of therapy have repeatedly proven effective in treating depression and managing negative thoughts.

