

The basic idea of cognitive therapy is that if you change your negative thinking, you will change your life. Negative thinking has consequences, including anxiety, depression, and addiction. The most common types of negative thinking are all-or-nothing thinking and focusing on the negatives.

If you think that some things must be perfect and anything less than perfect is a failure, you will probably feel anxious. If you focus on the few negatives in your life and disqualify the many positives, you will probably feel depressed. Cognitive therapy helps you identify your negative thinking and gives you a step-by-step plan of how to replace it with healthier thinking.

The basic tool of cognitive therapy is the thought review. It is a chance to reflect on your thinking *after the fact*, when you're not reacting out of fear or anger and to systematically come up with healthier alternatives.

These are some common types of negative thinking:

- All-or-Nothing Thinking: "I have to do things perfectly, and anything less is a failure."
- Focusing on the Negatives: "Nothing goes my way. It feels like one disappointment after another." A variation is being overly judgmental: "The world is falling apart. I don't like what I see around me."
- Negative Self-Labeling: "I'm a failure. If people knew the real me, they wouldn't like me. I am flawed."
- Catastrophizing. "If something is going to happen, it'll probably be the worst case scenario."
- Excessive Need for Approval: "I can only be happy if people like me. If someone is upset, it's probably my fault."
- Mind Reading: "I can tell people don't like me because of the way they behave."
- Should Statements: "People should be fair, and when they are not they should be punished."
- Disqualifying the Present: "I'll relax later. But first I have to rush to finish this."
- Dwelling on the Past. "If I dwell on why I'm unhappy and what went wrong, maybe I'll feel better."
- Pessimism. "Life is a struggle. I don't think we are meant to be happy. I don't trust people who are happy. If something good happens in my life, I usually have to pay for it with something bad."

There are 10 steps to a thought review. The first six steps help you understand your negative thinking and where it came from. The next four steps help you come up with healthier thinking and incorporate it into your life. You can write a thought review about any unpleasant experience that you would like to have handled differently. You can write about past or current experiences. Start with easy ones at first.

1. The situation. Briefly describe the situation that led to your unpleasant feelings. This will help you remember the situation later if you review your notes.

I said something wrong at a social event. I felt embarrassed and later I was anxious thinking about it.

2. Initial thought. What thought first crossed your mind? This was probably a subconscious or automatic thought that you have had before.

I feel like a failure. I worry that people will judge me. I hate that I feel this way inside, and that I'm always making dumb mistakes.

3. Consider the consequences. Why do you want to change your thinking? Consider the short-term and long-term consequences if you don't change? Look at the psychological, physical, professional, and relationship consequences.

If I continue to think like this, my negativity will affect my relationships and possibly my health. I'm damaging my self-esteem. I'll become exhausted.

4. Challenge your initial thought. How successful has this thinking been for you in the past? What facts do you have that support or challenge your initial thought? What strengths do you have that you may have overlooked? What advice would you give someone else in the same situation?

I feel overwhelmed when I try to be perfect. I'm hard on myself. I don't have to be perfect. People who always beat themselves up are boring. I prefer people who are kind to themselves. People have been interested in what I have said in the past. I am not this critical of other people who make occasional mistakes.

5. [Optional] Negative thinking. Summarize the kind of negative thinking behind your initial thought. Identify one or more types: All-or-nothing, Focusing on the negatives, Catastrophizing, Negative self-labelling, Excessive need for approval, Mind reading, Should statements.

I was mind-reading, self-labeling and focusing on the negatives.

6. [Optional] Background. When did you first have initial thoughts like this? How deep do the roots go? Do you know anyone else who thinks like this? How successful has this thinking been for them?

I can hear the voice of my parent saying that I'm a failure and that I'll never amount to anything.

7. Alternative thinking. Now that you understand your negative thinking, look for a healthier way of thinking about the situation. How could you have handled it differently?

I don't have to be perfect. Nobody is. I have some strengths that people appreciate. I want to get rid of this negative thinking. I feel better when I am kind to myself.

8. Positive belief and affirmation. Write down an affirmation, in a positive form, that reflects your healthier approach. Choose something that you can use as a reminder.

Everybody makes mistakes. Be kind to yourself.

9. Action plan. What can you do if this situation arises again? Knowing your tendencies, how can you prepare for the situation? Write a list of strengths you bring to the situation? What can you do if you fall back on old habits?

The next time I make a mistake, I won't dwell on the negatives. I will remind myself of my past successes. I will remember to be kind to myself and to others.

10. Improvement. Do you feel slightly better or more optimistic? This step reinforces the idea that if you change your thinking, you will change your life.