



Healthy Thinking

(adapted from the Healthy Mind, Healthy Body Handbook, Time Life Medical, 1996)

Optimistic thinking can have an effect on your overall health. It can help improve your mood and self-esteem, and decrease depression, anxiety, and hostility. Research suggests that optimistic thinking also can lessen pain, speed recovery from surgery, and enhance immune system functioning.

You Feel What You Think

People assume that outside events cause our moods. However, we can experience the exact same situation and, at different times or in different moods, we can feel and respond differently in that same situation. This is because we are constantly talking to ourselves and we use this self-talk to explain the world around us. These explanations or interpretations influence how we feel and what actions we take. However, we are often not aware of these automatic thoughts we are having. Instead, we notice anger, depression, or anxiety without connecting these feelings with the negative thoughts that are going on in our minds. For example, after getting a grade that was lower than you expected, you might say to yourself, "I shouldn't be here—I am a bad student." This type of thought is often followed by sadness—which you typically will notice. The good news is that this distorted or negatively skewed self-talk can be changed and healthier thoughts can be cultivated.

How to Think in a Healthier Way

- The first step in changing your thinking is to recognize unhelpful negative thoughts. On a piece of paper, write down the situation that is bothering you. Only write down the facts at this point, no interpretation or judgment. You have to practice this—simply reading the exercise below or doing it in your head will not change your thinking.
 1. Draw three columns on the sheet. Label the far left column "Feelings/Body response," and write down what you feel (angry, depressed, anxious, guilty, neck ache, heart racing, etc.).
 2. Label the middle column "Negative Thoughts," and list the thoughts or pictures that went through your mind just before and during the situation.
 3. Label the far right column "Alternative Responses," and list the arguments against each of your major negative thoughts. Write down a more rational response to it. See below for questions to help you challenge your negative thoughts.

EXAMPLE:

Situation: I didn't get the grade that I wanted on my test.

Feelings/Body Responses	Negative Thoughts	Alternative Responses
I feel depressed.	I'm a bad student.	I'm successful in many ways.
I feel discouraged.	I'll never be successful.	I can ask for help with my study strategies.

- Challenge your automatic thoughts. Each time you discover a pessimistic thought, use the following questions to challenge them:
 1. Have I really identified what's bothering me?
 2. Am I greatly exaggerating the situation?
 3. Am I overgeneralizing? For example, "I'll never be successful." Simply because something happened once, doesn't mean it will happen again.
 4. Am I overworrying?
 5. Am I assuming the worst? When I consider the worst thing that could happen, would it truly be a disaster? With catastrophic thinking, small events can become exaggerated. Counter these thoughts with facts and reason.
 6. Am I making an unrealistic or unfair comparison? Who am I comparing myself to?
 7. Do I have the evidence for my conclusion? Am I reading someone's mind or predicting the future? For example, if you think: "I will never get a good grade," you are attempting to predict the future.
 8. Am I taking it too personally? For example, if you think: "If I would have treated him better, he wouldn't have left me." It is healthy to accept personal responsibility, but not to blame yourself for situations that aren't entirely under your control.
 9. Am I discounting the positive? Do you say, "I was just lucky" or "She just said that to make me feel better," you may be ignoring positive aspects of the situation. Then, the negative thoughts can affect your mood.
 10. Am I expecting perfection? Give yourself a break. Mistakes are part of being human and can be opportunities to learn and grow.