

BREAKING THE HABIT

Do you plummet into bouts of misery for no apparent reason, or get into a flap about minor events beyond your control? What about agonising for hours over a social gaffe, or feeling victimised by minor everyday incidents? If you do, then you may be a victim of your own thoughts. Your state of mind affects your sense of happiness and well-being, and can contribute to depression, anxiety, stress, low self esteem and lack of self-confidence.

The way you feel about something depends largely on how you think about it, not, as is often thought, on some external event or “cause”. Human beings are constantly evaluating things, assessing them, coming to conclusions and developing their own way of looking at the world. Information we store away contributes to the way we view things. The way we view things has a great influence on the way we feel and behave.

Problems arise when thoughts and assumptions are less than rational. Irrational thoughts are those where there is no real evidence to support them – nothing substantial to suggest that they are true. By habitually thinking and accepting negative and irrational thoughts as true we view situations as worse than they are and consequently end up feeling worse than we should.

People prone to anxiety, for example, will often focus on the worst possible outcome, rather than on a realistic appraisal of what probably will happen. Your emotional state is a result of the way you evaluate or label situations, not necessarily of the objective characteristics of the situation itself. People who are depressed tend to see the world in a very negative light, labelling themselves as hopeless.

Often, irrational thought patterns become so habitual you don't even realise it. Thoughts become unconscious and emotional responses seem to occur automatically. A common irrational belief is thinking you need to be successful at everything you do. This is not a realistic expectation to have of yourself. It is much more rational to accept that you will make mistakes sometimes.

How much of a problem your irrational beliefs will cause depends on how strongly you hold them. So, what can you do about thinking irrationally? Changing habitual thoughts is not easy, but it is possible. The first step is to identify what it is you're saying to yourself. Then you need to replace your thoughts with some straight thinking. Look objectively at the thought and ask, “is that a realistic view?” Try focusing on one situation, one about which you feel habitually bad, and write it down.

Once you have analysed it, formulate a more rational thought and repeat this to yourself when you are in particular situation. Rational thinking is not simply a rejection of all negative thoughts or “positive thinking”; it is a way of looking at things using the facts that maximise your chances of success. It acknowledges any bad feelings you might have, but doesn’t dwell on or exaggerate these thoughts. This is not only a more realistic view; it’s obviously much more helpful.

The first step in gaining control over your emotions is to become aware of the automatic thoughts that go through your mind immediately before a painful emotion. The painful emotion is in itself a sign that the negative thought has gone just before it. Try and catch that thought, identify it, write it down. You can do this by carrying a notebook with you, and write down those automatic negative thoughts that come just before you experience an unpleasant emotion. The thoughts themselves will often be noted in shorthand, so at the end of the day, during a quiet period, you will want to expand them.

For example, a person you are talking to yawns, and you feel awful. In your notebook, you may want to enter “Mary is bored with me”. Later, when you have more time, you may want to expand this into “As I was talking to Mary, she yawned and I immediately thought I was boring her. I am a bore, it is dreadful being a bore, people reject me because they find me boring, and this is terrible.”

If you cannot carry a small notebook around with you, you will have to rely more on your memory. At the end of the day, find a quiet place and reconstruct in your mind each occasion during that day that you felt a painful emotion. Go over each incident as vividly as you can, try to re-live it, and while re-living it, try to catch thoughts that came just before the painful emotion and expand them as in the sample above.

In addition, any situation in which you find yourself unhappy with your feelings and actions, or confused by feelings, which seem unrelated to, or out of proportion to the situation, ask yourself the following questions:-

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| 1. | What do I think about myself? | How rational is this? |
| 2. | What do you think about the other person? | How rational is this? |
| 3. | How do I think about this situation? | How rational is this? |