

Twenty Questions to Help You Challenge Negative Thoughts

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

1. Am I confusing a thought with a fact?

The fact that you believe something to be true does not necessarily mean that it is. Would your thought be accepted as correct by other people? Would it stand up in court, or be dismissed as circumstantial? What objective evidence do you have to back it up and to contradict it?

Automatic thought

When I met Peter in the street today, he didn't smile at me. I must have done something to offend him.

Possible answer

It's true that he didn't smile at me but I have no reason to believe he's offended with me. It probably had nothing at all to do with me- maybe he just had something on his mind.

2. Am I jumping to conclusions?

This is the result of basing what you think on poor evidence. For instance, depressed people often believe that others are thinking critically about them. But none of us are mind-readers. How do you know what someone else is thinking? You may be right, but don't jump to conclusions - stick to what you know, and if you don't know, see if you can find out.

Automatic thought

My husband didn't eat that chocolate cake I baked for him. He thinks I'm a terrible cook.

Possible answer

All I know for sure is that he didn't eat it. I don't actually know whether he thinks I'm a terrible cook or not. Maybe he just wasn't hungry - I can ask him.

WHAT ALTERNATIVES ARE THERE?

3. Am I assuming my view of things is the only one possible?

Automatic thought

That was a terrible mistake; I'll never learn to do this properly.

Possible answer

If I wasn't depressed, I'd probably shrug my shoulders and do what I could to set the situation right and learn from my errors. Tom made just the same mistake last week, and he made a joke of it.

WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF THINKING THE WAY I DO?

4. What do you want? What are your goals? Do you want to be happy and get the most out of life? Is the way you are thinking now helping you to achieve this? Or is it standing in the way of what you want?

Automatic thought

I've wasted my life - so many lost opportunities.

Possible answer

Brooding about the past only makes me depressed. The question is what am I going to make of my future?

5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking this way?

Many distorted thought patterns do have some pay off - that is what keeps them going. But do the disadvantages outweigh the advantages? If so, you can think of a new way of looking at things which will give you the advantages, but avoid the disadvantages of the old way.

Automatic thought

I must make a good impression at this party.

Advantage: I'll go out of my way to talk to people. If they like me, I'll feel marvellous.

Disadvantage: If somebody doesn't like me, I'll feel terrible and think badly of myself.

Possible answer

Telling myself I must make a good impression just puts pressure on me, and will make it difficult to relax and enjoy

myself. It is impossible for everyone to like me all of the time. It's very nice when they do, but if they don't, it's not the end of the world.

6. Am I asking questions that have no answers?

Questions like "How can I undo the past?" "Why aren't I different?", "What is the meaning of life?", "Why does this always happen to me?", "Why is life so unfair?" Brooding over questions like these is a guaranteed way to depress yourself. If you can turn them into answerable questions, so much the better. If not, don't waste time on them.

Automatic thought

When will I do better again?

Possible answer

There's no answer to that. Going over and over it just makes me worried and upset. I'd do better to work out what I can do to help myself get over this depression as quickly as possible.

WHAT THINKING ERRORS AM I MAKING?

7. Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms?

Nearly everything is relative. People, for instance, are not usually all good or all bad. They are a mixture of the two. Are you applying this kind of black-and-white thinking to yourself?

Automatic thought

I did that really badly. I might as well not bother.

Possible answer

The fact is you didn't do it as well as you wanted to. That doesn't mean it was no good at all. You can't expect to do everything 100% right. If you do, you'll never be satisfied.

8. Am I using ultimatum words in my thinking?

Watch out for words like always/never, everyone/none, everything/nothing. The chances are that the situation is actually less clear-cut than that. Mostly it's a case of sometimes, some people and some things.

Automatic thought

Everything always goes badly for me.

Possible answer

That's an exaggeration. Some things go badly for me, just like they do for anyone else, but some things go well.

9. Am I condemning myself as a total person on the basis of a single event?

Depressed people often take difficulties to mean that they have no value at all as a person. Are you making this kind of blanket judgement?

Automatic thought

I was so irritable with the children this morning. I'm a terrible mother and a wicked person.

Possible answer

The fact that on a particular day, at a particular time, in particular circumstances, I was irritable does not mean I'm a terrible mother or a wicked person. I can't reasonably expect never to be irritated and making myself depressed by writing myself off completely is not going to help me to be nicer to the children when they get in from school.

10. Am I concentrating on my weakness and forgetting my strengths?

When people become depressed, they often overlook problems they handled successfully in the past, and resources which would help them to overcome current difficulties. Once they change their thinking they are often amazed at their ability to deal with problems. How have you coped with similar difficulties in the past?

Automatic thought

I can't stand being alone now that Jane has gone.

Possible answer

I was alone before I met her. I made an effort to get out and meet people, and spent time doing things I enjoyed. In fact, I was quite happy - and probably can be again. I'll phone Bob for a start.

11. Am I blaming myself for something which is not really my fault?

Depressed people, for instance, blame themselves for being depressed. They put it down to lack of willpower, or weakness, and criticise themselves for not "pulling themselves together". In fact, scientists have been studying depression for many years, and they are still not certain what causes it. Depression is a difficult problem to solve, and blaming yourself for it will only make you more depressed.

Automatic thought

I must be really stupid to have these distorted thoughts.

Possible answer

Stupidity is one possible reason. When I look at myself as a whole, there's not much evidence that I'm stupid.

have these thoughts because I'm depressed. When I'm feeling better, I think quite differently.

12. Am I taking something personally which has little or nothing to do with me?

When things go wrong, depressed people often believe that in some way this is directed at them personally, or caused by them. In fact, it may have nothing to do with them.

Automatic thought

Mary doesn't like me at all. She would never have shouted at me like that if she did.

Possible answer

I'm not the only person Mary shouts at. She's always on the edge when things aren't going well for her, and she shouts at whoever is around. I've seen her. She'll get over it and probably apologize.

13. Am I expecting myself to be perfect?

It is simply not possible to get everything right all the time. Depressed people often set up unrealistically high standards for themselves. They then condemn themselves for making mistakes, or acting in ways they would rather not have done. Accepting that you can't be perfect does not mean you have to give up trying to do things well. It means that you can learn from your difficulties and mistakes, instead of being upset and paralyzed by them.

Automatic thought

This is not good enough. I should have completed everything I planned to do.

Possible answer

I can't always expect to carry out everything I plan. I'm not God; I'm fallible, like any other human being. It would have been nice if I had finished, but the fact that I haven't is not a disaster. Focus on what you have done, not on what you have failed to do. That way you will be encouraged to try again.

14. Am I using a double standard?

You may be expecting more of yourself than you would of another person. How would you react to someone else in your situation? Would you be so hard on them? You can afford to be as kind to yourself as you would to someone else. It won't lead to collapse.

Automatic thought

I'm pathetic. I shouldn't be so upset by things.

Possible answer

If someone else was upset by this situation, I'd be sympathetic towards them, and try to help them try to find a

solution to the problem. I certainly wouldn't call them pathetic - I'd be able to see that it wouldn't help. I can do the same for myself. It will give me the courage to carry on.

15. Am I paying attention only to the black side of things?

Are you, for instance, focusing on everything that has gone wrong during the day, and forgetting or discounting things you have enjoyed or achieved?

Automatic thought

That was really a terrible day.

Possible answer

Hang on a moment. You were late for a meeting, and you had a disagreement with your son, but on the whole your work went well, and you enjoyed the cinema this evening. All in all, it wasn't a bad day. Only remembering the bad things is part of depression - watch out for it.

16. Am I overestimating the chances of disaster?

Depressed people often believe that if things go at all wrong, disaster is sure to follow. If the day starts badly, it can only get worse. How likely is it that what you expect will really happen? Is there really nothing you can do to change the course of events?

Automatic thought

I didn't get all my work done today again. I'll get the sack.

Possible answer

When was the last time they sacked someone from this firm for not having time to finish the job? It's perfectly normal not to finish, when we all have to work under so much pressure. If my boss comments, I can explain the situation to him.

17. Am I exaggerating the importance of events?

What difference does a particular event really make to your life? What will you make of it in a week, a year, 10 years? Will anyone else remember what you now see as a terrible thing today? If you do, will you feel the same way about it? Probably not.

Automatic thought

I made a real fool of myself at that party. I'll never be able to face them again.

Possible answer

Don't make a mountain out of a molehill. Most people didn't even notice. I don't suppose anyone who did thought anything of it. We'll probably laugh at it in the future - it certainly makes a good story.

18. Am I fretting about the way things ought to be, instead of accepting and dealing with them as they are?

Automatic thought

It's no good. I'll never sort this out.

Are you allowing events in the world at large to feed your depression? Telling yourself life is unjust, and people are brutes? It is sad that there is so much suffering in the world, and you may decide to do what you can to change things, but getting depressed about it does nothing to help.

Automatic thought

That presentation about old people in the projects was awful. Life is terribly cruel. Things should be different.

Possible answer

Things are as they are, and to want them different is counter to reality - like wishing the zebra had no stripes. Getting depressed about it is not going to help the situation. Why not see if I can visit someone at the long-term care facility?

19. Am I assuming I can do nothing to change my situation?

Pessimism about the chances of changing things is central to depression. It makes you give up before you even start. You can't know that there is no solution to your problems until you try. Is the way you are thinking helping you to find answers, or is it making you turn down possible solutions without even giving them a go?

Possible answer

If you tell yourself that, you certainly won't. Sit down and work out what you could do. Even if some of your solutions haven't worked before, that does not mean they won't now. What was it that stopped them from working?

20. Am I predicting the future instead of experimenting with it?

The fact that you have acted in a certain way in the past does not mean to say that you have to do so in the future. If you predict the future, instead of trying something different, you are cutting yourself off from the chance of change. Change may be difficult, but it is not impossible.

Automatic thought

I'll never manage to stand up for myself. I never have.

Possible answer

The fact that I never have does not mean I never can. Doing so will make me feel uncomfortable, but if I stick with it, it will become more natural. Also other people will respect me more.