

Reducing negative thoughts and increasing positive thoughts

Below, you can find some tips on how to reduce negative thoughts in the long-term and increase positive thoughts. This is important to improve or stabilize your mood.

TECHNIQUES TO REDUCE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

Thought stopping

Intervene in negative thought processes using the word: “STOP.” Then, consciously focus your attention on a positive thought or tell yourself: “That thought is ruining my mood, so I’ll think of something else instead.” In particular, very entrenched thoughts that keep on surfacing are sometimes difficult to interrupt in your mind only. It can help to get active and do something else, for instance escape the situation and do some exercise.

If your thoughts are do with things that are “unavoidable”, write them down and make a plan to think about them at a later (planned!) moment.

Worry hour

You shouldn’t just ignore thoughts about things that are “unavoidable”. But constantly brooding over a problem isn’t likely to help you find a resolution. So, consciously set aside a certain time each day to focus your full attention on the problem bothering you.

Choose a quiet place, set a period of time for it, and set an alarm clock (maximum 30 minutes).

Don’t do anything else during this time except concentrate completely on the problem and try to find a resolution. Make sure not to lose track of the strategies and techniques you develop in this connection so that it is easier for you to apply them routinely. If you can’t find a resolution on your own, ask family or friends for support. Use the “thought stopping” technique at all other times.

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The inflation technique

Exaggerate (“inflate”) a disturbing thought so far that it seems ridiculous. For example, if you constantly worry about not being a good person for no reason, try imagining that your picture is going to appear in a newspaper with the caption underneath: “This is a bad person!”

If you can manage to smile at such a mental image, it’s worked.

The worst that could happen

Consider realistically: “What is the worst that could really happen if my fears come true?”

An example: You’re really worried that your contribution to group work in a seminar won’t be good enough. In this case, you can tell yourself: “I’m overreacting. It may be that someone could be angry with me or disappointed in me for a while.” At the core of the situation, however, is the question of whether this would really be a disaster or could even threaten your chances of getting your degree. The answer is very probably “no”, so why get so worked up about it?

Fostering such realistic thoughts will help you to become calmer again and to concentrate better on what you genuinely need to be doing.

Mental time travel

Say to yourself: “What will things look like in five or ten years time? Will I still be worrying about this present problem or event?”

The aim is to mentally lift the dark curtain between you and your future so that you can more clearly see what might really happen.

Even if certain painful memories can linger, the associated pain does diminish over time.

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TECHNIQUES TO PROMOTE POSITIVE THOUGHTS

The pump technique

The aim of the technique is to “pump” positive thoughts into yourself. To do this, write a single different positive thought on individual index cards of a deck. Throughout the day draw out individual cards from the deck and read the thought carefully to remind yourself that you have positive qualities and that there are wonderful things in your life. If you think of new positive thoughts, write them down on new cards. Put blank cards in the deck. Whenever you draw a blank card, come up with something positive.

The signal technique

Use colored stickers or attractive postcards attached to sites around your room or apartment that you pass by frequently to act as signals. Whenever you see a signal, think of something positive.

You can also link positive thoughts to frequently performed activities. In this way, everyday activities such as brushing your teeth, looking in the mirror and cycling become signals that make you think of something positive.

Reward yourself

Be conscious of it when you’ve done something well and acknowledge this by praising or rewarding yourself. You can (mentally) pat yourself on the back, for example. A mental way to reward yourself might be to say to yourself: “I did that well!” or you can buy yourself something nice.

Positive diary

Write down daily, for instance before going to bed, what positive experiences you had during the day or what you achieved. Five minutes a day is enough for this exercise. If you can manage it, keep writing your diary every day. That way, you’ll be able to go back and read sections when you’re not feeling so good.

Adapted from Kühner, C. & Weber, I. (2001). Depressionen vorbeugen. S. 169-171. Göttingen: Hogrefe.