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WELL  |  MIND

# The Year of Conquering Negative Thinking

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By LESLEY ALDERMAN    JAN. 3, 2017

Here's a New Year's challenge for the mind: Make this the year that you quiet all those negative thoughts swirling around your brain.

All humans have a tendency to be a bit more like Eeyore than Tigger, to ruminate more on bad experiences than positive ones. It's an evolutionary adaptation that helps us avoid danger and react quickly in a crisis.

But constant negativity can also get in the way of happiness, add to our stress and worry level and ultimately damage our health. And some people are more prone to negative thinking than others. Thinking styles can be genetic or the result of childhood experiences, said Judith Beck, a psychologist and the president of the Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy in Bala Cynwyd, Pa. Children may develop negative thinking habits if they have been teased or bullied, or experienced blatant trauma or abuse. Women, overall, are also more likely to ruminate than men, according to a 2013 study.

"We were built to overlearn from negative experiences, but under learn from positive ones," said Rick Hanson, a psychologist and senior fellow at the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley.

But with practice you can learn to disrupt and tame negative cycles.

The first step to stopping negative thoughts is a surprising one. Don't *try* to stop them. If you are obsessing about a lost promotion or the results of the presidential election, whatever you do, don't tell yourself, "I have to stop thinking about this."

"Worry and obsession get worse when you try to control your thoughts," Dr. Beck said.

Instead, notice that you are in a negative cycle and own it. Tell yourself, "I'm obsessing about my bad review." Or "I'm obsessing about the election."

By acknowledging your negative cycle and accepting it, you are on your way to taming your negative thoughts. Acceptance is the basic premise of mindfulness meditation, a practice that helps reduce stress and reactivity. You don't necessarily have to close your eyes and meditate every day to reap the benefits of mindfulness. You can remind yourself to notice your thoughts in a nonjudgmental manner, without trying to change or alter them right away.

Accepting negative thoughts can also help lessen their weight. Getting mad at yourself for worrying or telling yourself to stop worrying only adds fuel to the negativity fire.

After you've accepted a negative thought, force yourself to challenge it.

Let's go back to the setback at work. Perhaps not getting the promotion made you worry about your overall competence and you were berating yourself about your skills. Ask yourself, "Why would one setback mean that I am incompetent?" Or you might ask, "What have I done in the past that shows I am actually a very competent worker?"

If you're having trouble challenging your negative thoughts, try this approach. Imagine that your friend is the one who received the bad news. What advice would you give him or her? Now think of how that advice might apply to you.

A study conducted at Ohio State University found that this method — known as Socratic questioning — was a simple way to reduce depressive symptoms in adults. In the study, 55 adults were enrolled in a 16-week course of cognitive therapy sessions. Researchers studied videotapes of the sessions and found that the more frequently therapists used Socratic questioning, the more the patients' depressive symptoms lessened. The study's authors theorized that Socratic questioning helped patients examine the validity of their negative thoughts and gain a broader, more realistic perspective on them.

There will be times when your bleak thoughts are actually valid, but your projections about what's next are not. Consider this scenario: Your partner has left you for someone else. "My partner doesn't love me anymore," might be accurate, said Dr. Beck, but "No one else will ever love me," is probably not.

Now move from a place of inaction to action to counteract the negative thought. If you are worried about feeling unloved, check in with friends and family members. If you are feeling insecure at work, make a list of your accomplishments. Perhaps ask your best friend to write you a letter telling you all the ways in which you are a good, kind person. Reread the letter daily.

Dr. Hanson, author of "Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence," said it may be helpful to ask yourself if you are accomplishing anything by dwelling on your negative thoughts. If you're ruminating on your financial problems during a run around the track in hopes of finding a solution, then that is useful. But fretting for lap after lap about the president-elect or a foreign crisis is not going to accomplish anything.

When your negative thoughts are making you feel agitated and overwhelmed, take a deep breath, and then another. Practicing controlled breathing can help lower the stress response and calm anxious thoughts.

Finally, if your thoughts are making you feel seriously distressed and interfering with your ability to work and relax, consider seeing a mental health professional. Therapists who specialize in cognitive therapy, which teaches

practical ways to cope with persistent and unwanted thoughts, may be particularly helpful. If the underlying source of your thoughts is clinical depression or intense anxiety, you might want to talk with a professional about the root cause of your negative thinking patterns and discuss medications that can be helpful.

While you are sorting out what approach works best for you, give yourself a break and have compassion for your overwrought thoughts.

"The more you dwell on the negative, the more accustomed your brain becomes to dwelling on the negative," said Dr. Hanson, who suggests asking yourself, "Are my thoughts helping to build me up, or tear me down?"

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