

Understanding Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs)

A ProFriends guide to noticing unhelpful thinking with curiosity, balance and self-compassion.

What are Automatic Negative Thoughts?

Automatic Negative Thoughts, often shortened to ANTs, are quick thoughts or interpretations that can appear almost automatically. They may be self-critical, pessimistic or based on assumptions, and they can influence how we feel and what we do next.

For example, after making a mistake, an ANT might sound like: "I always mess things up" or "I am not good enough." The thought can feel convincing in the moment - but a thought is not automatically a fact.

A helpful aim is not to force negative thoughts away. It is to notice them, get curious about them, and decide whether there may be a fairer or more balanced way of looking at the situation.

Common ANTs to look out for

- All-or-nothing thinking - seeing things in black-and-white terms, with little room for the middle ground.

Example: "If I did not do this perfectly, I failed."

- Overgeneralising - taking one difficult experience and turning it into a rule about everything.

Example: "I did not get the promotion, so I will never succeed."

- Catastrophising - jumping quickly to the worst possible outcome.

Example: "I made a mistake, so everything is going to go wrong."

- Mind reading - assuming we know what someone else is thinking without having the evidence.

Example: "She has not replied, so she must be annoyed with me."

- "Should" statements - holding ourselves to rigid expectations about how we ought to think, feel or behave.

Example: "I should always cope well under pressure. If I do not, I have failed."

A ProFriends favourite: notice when you are "shoulding" yourself.

Notice before you judge

These thoughts often arrive quickly and without much conscious effort. Rather than labelling yourself as "negative", try noticing the thought with curiosity. What was happening? What did your mind tell you? How did that affect how you felt or responded?

Notice, don't judge. Awareness gives you a little more space to choose what you do next.

Reflecting on your own ANTs

1. When do these thoughts show up most?

Think about situations such as pressure at work, conflict, uncertainty, comparison or setbacks.

2. What does your inner critic tend to say?

Write down one or two phrases you notice. Would you speak to somebody you care about in the same way?

3. What happens next?

Notice any feelings, physical sensations or behaviours that follow the thought.

4. Is there a pattern?

Do certain situations, people or expectations seem to trigger the same type of thought?

A simple thought check

What happened?	What did my mind tell me?

Tip: Journalling or using a thought tracker can make repeated patterns easier to spot. You do not need to analyse every thought - just begin by noticing.

Pause • Reflect • Act

PAUSE — Notice the thought before reacting to it.

REFLECT — Ask what you are telling yourself, what evidence you have, and whether there may be another perspective.

ACT — Choose how you want to respond or identify one small step you can take.

You do not have to solve the whole situation. Sometimes creating a little space between the thought and the response is enough to change what happens next.

Five steps to work with an ANT

1. Pause and label it

Try: "I am noticing the thought that..." This creates a little distance between you and the thought.

2. Get curious

Ask yourself: What evidence supports this thought? What evidence does not? Am I assuming, predicting or jumping to a conclusion?

3. Look for another perspective

Instead of replacing the thought with forced positivity, look for something more balanced, realistic and supportive.

4. Focus on progress, not perfection

A difficult moment does not erase your progress. Small steps, learning and adjustment all count.

5. Add self-compassion

Ask: What would I say to a friend in this situation? Can I offer some of that same fairness to myself?

Reframing in practice

ANT	A more balanced thought
I failed that presentation. I am terrible at public speaking.	That presentation did not go as I hoped, but I can learn from it and prepare differently next time.
Everyone else is coping better than me.	I can only see part of other people's experience. I can focus on what I need and what will help me today.
I should have sorted this by now.	There is no fixed timetable for change. I can choose one manageable next step.

Balanced thinking is not about pretending everything is fine. It is about making room for a fuller picture.

Your turn

Choose one thought that has been showing up recently. You do not need to solve everything - just use the prompts below to explore it with a little more curiosity.

The situation:

The automatic thought:

How did it make me feel or respond?

What evidence supports the thought?

What evidence suggests there may be another perspective?

What would I say to a friend?

A more balanced thought could be:

One small step I can take:



A gentle reminder

Automatic thoughts are part of being human. Some will be useful and some will not. You do not have to believe every thought that appears, and you do not have to battle with it either. Sometimes the first step is simply noticing: 'There is that thought again.'

With practice, you may find it easier to recognise familiar patterns, question assumptions and respond to yourself with more balance and compassion. The aim is not perfect thinking - it is greater awareness and more choice.

How ProFriends can support you

Thought patterns, self-doubt and the inner critic are common themes in coaching. At ProFriends, we can explore what is happening for you, what may be keeping you stuck and what realistic changes could help you move forward.

If you would like to explore whether coaching feels right for you, you can book a free 30-minute discovery call. There is no obligation to continue.

Supporting your goals, one step at a time.

Important note

This resource is for general information and personal reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and does not replace medical, psychological or other professional mental-health support. If your thoughts are causing significant distress, feel difficult to manage, or you are concerned about your wellbeing, please seek appropriate support from a qualified health professional.