

## A CBTANDFEELINGGOOD.COM WORKBOOK EXTRACT: ABOUT NEGATIVE AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS (NATs):



We all have lots of thoughts that go through our minds everyday. When stress becomes a disorder it can cause a 'shift in thinking', and many thoughts can be irrational and unhelpful, causing upsetness and self limiting behaviours. We call these **negative automatic thoughts** – and CBT helps us to build awareness of what they are, and when they happen, and what effect they have – allowing us more control to understand and examine and challenge and replace them with rational healthy thinking instead – over and over, until the healthy thoughts are the automatic ones.

### Negative automatic thoughts (NATs) are:

- **Involuntary/automatic** – you don't *decide* to think these thoughts, but they've become hardwired over time and lurk and linger, controlling your moods and behaviour, controlling the quality of your life. Without deliberate awareness you may not even realise you're having them.
- **Irrational** – NATs are the messengers of unhelpful thinking habits like *emotional reasoning* and *fortune telling* and *mind reading* – they're generally illogical – we aim to ask of each unhelpful thought and belief we uncover 'where is the evidence for this?', 'Is there evidence against this?', 'Is there another way of looking at this?' .... until we develop new realistic evidence based thinking in their place.
- **Enemies** – NATs appear to protect you from discomfort by persuading you to practice self sabotaging behaviours - for instance *avoidant behaviour*, avoiding something you believe is a 'hazard or danger' that will cause you upset and be 'pointless' anyway (trying new things, being proactive, a new career, opportunities, new relationships, making new friends... take your pick...), and so on . . . But actually, these beliefs and behaviours just stop you being stimulated and living an exciting happy life. They keep you hardwired for fear.
- **Not unchangeable!** – you can take control of your thinking and moods and behaviours if you put in the work, it's proven, try it. Free yourself!

Here are some examples of negative automatic thoughts:

- I can't cope
- I'm not like other people, I'm not normal.
- People don't respect me
- I'm a failure
- People don't think I'm nice
- Everything is just too hard
- I'll always mess everything up, what's the point?
- It's not fair
- No one really cares what happens to me
- Nothing will ever work out for me
- There is nothing to look forward to
- I'm not ready to do things right now, maybe in a few months
- I'm screwed
- I can't do anything right.

It's important to remember that these sorts of thoughts can *seem* true when you are low, but in reality, they are irrational and have become a vicious circle - but you can learn how to challenge them / not accept them.

See the next page for the ABC beginners handout, building awareness of the links between our thinking and our feelings and our behaviours (refer to the following page's 'unhelpful thinking habits' for help in identifying your thoughts and beliefs. Catching your literal thinking isn't as easy as it seems. These habit references are wonderful to give us a keyword shorthand that sparks understanding and association – but they're just a guide – your journaling should be your own words for the best exercise outcomes.

**The ‘awareness building’ ABC form:**

Give a short description of **A** in one sentence, and then go to the **C** columns: (use this table as a guide if you wish to complete the work in your own journal):

- **C1** - naming the emotions you felt, and if you had a physical reaction, in response to this situation?
- **C2** - and naming any self sabotaging behaviours you may have had in response to this situation.

Next to **B** – List your beliefs and thoughts about the situation, what does it mean and say about you? Others? the world?

Next – go back to **A**, and expand on how you see the situation in as much detail as you can.

<b>A</b> Activating situation or event	<b>B</b> Belief and thought	<b>C<sup>1</sup></b> Consequential Feelings	<b>C<sup>2</sup></b> Consequential Behaviours

Note:

## What are your unhelpful Thinking Habits?

[Adapted from [www.getselfhelp.co.uk/unhelpful.htm](http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/unhelpful.htm) - © Carol Vivyan 2009, permission to use for therapy purposes]

Over the years, we tend to get into unhelpful thinking habits such as those described below. We might favour some over others, and there might be some that seem far too familiar. Once you can identify your unhelpful thinking styles, you can start to notice them – they very often occur just before and during distressing situations. Once you can notice them, then that can help you to challenge or distance yourself from those thoughts, and see the situation in a different and more helpful way. *The questions in italics help us find alternative, more realistic thoughts.*

**Mental Filtering** - When we notice only what the filter allows or wants us to notice, and we dismiss anything that doesn't 'fit'. Like looking through dark blinkers or 'gloomy specs', or only catching the negative stuff in our 'kitchen strainers' whilst anything more positive or unrealistic is dismissed.

*Am I only noticing the bad stuff? Am I filtering out the positives? Am I wearing those 'gloomy specs'? What would be more realistic?*

**Judgements** - Making evaluations or judgements about events, ourselves, others, or the world, rather than describing what we actually see and have evidence for.

*I'm making an evaluation about the situation or person. It's how I make sense of the world, but that doesn't mean my judgements are always right or helpful. Is there another perspective?*

**Prediction** - Believing we know what's going to happen in the future.

*Am I thinking that I can predict the future? How likely is it that that might really happen?*

**Emotional Reasoning** - I feel bad so it must be bad! I feel anxious, so I must be in danger.

*Just because it feels bad, doesn't necessary mean it is bad. My feelings are just a reaction to my thoughts – and thoughts are just automatic brain reflexes*

**Mind-Reading** - Assuming we know what others are thinking (usually about us).

*Am I assuming I know what others are thinking? What's the evidence? Those are my own thoughts, not theirs. Is there another, more balanced way of looking at it?*

**Mountains and Molehills** - Exaggerating the risk of danger, or the negatives. Minimising the odds of how things are most likely to turn out, or minimising positives

*Am I exaggerating the bad stuff? How would someone else see it? What's the bigger picture?*

**Comparing and Rating** - Seeing only the good and positive aspects in others, and getting upset when comparing ourselves negatively against them.

*Am I doing that 'compare and despair' thing? What would be a more balanced and helpful way of looking at it?*

**Catastrophising** - Imagining and believing that the worst possible thing will happen

*OK, thinking that the worst possible thing will definitely happen isn't really helpful right now. What's most likely to happen?*

**Inner Critic /critical self** - Putting ourselves down, self-criticism, blaming ourselves for events or situations that are not (totally) our responsibility

*There I go, that internal bully's at it again. Would most people who really know me say that about me? Is this something that I am totally responsible for?*

**Black and white thinking** - Believing that something or someone can be only good or bad, right or wrong, rather than anything in-between or 'shades of grey'.

*Things aren't either totally white or totally black –Where is this on the spectrum?*

**Shoulds and musts and oughts** - Thinking or saying I or people or things 'must and should and ought be a way I demand' sets up unrealistic expectations.

*Am I putting more pressure on myself, setting up expectations that are almost impossible? Would it be more realistic to change these from demands to preferences?*

**Memories** - Current situations and events can trigger upsetting memories, leading us to believe that the danger is here and now, rather than in the past, causing us distress right now.

*This is just a reminder of the past. That was then, and this is now. Even though this memory makes me feel upset, it's not actually happening again right now.*

**Disputing the distorted thinking we've discovered with: The ABCD form, adding a Disputing column:**

<b>A</b> Activating situation or event (Strip it down to it's simple presentation, without imposing your 'B's.	<b>B</b> Beliefs and thoughts (strip them down to one sentence for each one)	<b>C1 and C2</b> Consequential Feelings & Behaviours (strip them down to naming an emotion and physiology, ie. 'angry' and 'shaking')	<b>D</b> Disputing 'B' ... where's the evidence? What is a more realistic interpretation?

Note: