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Challenge Negative Thinking

Alexander Draghici16K reads

Challenging negative thinking might seem hard in theory, but it all boils down to your own ability to learn and practice the basic principles of rational thinking. In fact, this article is actually a short introduction to rational living.

Your social anxiety is not caused by other people's actions, but by how you interpret those actions. Remember the dysfunctional schemas? If the filter is 'bad', so is the information that passes through it. These 6 principles will teach you how to challenge automatic negative thoughts and dysfunctional schemas, by adopting a different perspective.

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Don't Make Mountains out of Molehills

For those of us who experience social anxiety, one small mistake is enough to ruin everything. After countless pep talks from your friends, you've finally made it to the party. You walk into the bar and you grab a drink. Your hands are shaking and before you know it, a few drops of wine land on your white shirt. 'OMG, I'm so clumsy. Why do these things keep happening to me? Now everyone will laugh at me. I'm so embarrassed.' This is what 'making mountains out of molehills' looks like. You take one small, barely noticeable mistake and blow it out of proportion.

Do Others Notice Your Mistakes?

In normal circumstances, people might not notice a small mistake and even if they do, they'll forget about it in the next 10 minutes. But if you make a big deal out of it, you'll attract more attention. If you start acting 'weird', they'll probably notice you, which might confirm some of your negative thoughts (e.g. 'Everyone is looking at me'). But they're looking at you because your behavior attracted their attention, not because there's something wrong with you.

What to Do When a Mistake Happens

Next time you make a small mistake (e.g. spill coffee on your pants, stutter in front of an audience, etc.) just stop for a second, acknowledge the fact that you've made a mistake and move on. It's all about shifting your focus. Paying too much attention to your small mistake is an open invitation for ANTs.

Just Because You Believe It, Doesn't Make It True

For starters, let's make a clear distinction between assumptions and facts. An assumption is nothing more than an educated guess, based on previous experience and basic logic. Facts are testable and verifiable constructs. They're universal truths, meaning that everyone on this planet accepts them as valid statements. If you throw a rock into a pond, it will sink.

Everyone knows and accepts this fact. Most of our ANTs, dysfunctional schemas and core cognitions are mere assumptions. We unconsciously accept them as facts because our mind cannot work with them unless they're labelled as 'truths'. Be careful what you choose to believe.

Question Your Assumptions

How can we test the validity of our assumptions? Easy, by questioning them! For example, what evidence do you have to support the statement that 'people are laughing at you'? More importantly, can you find evidence that contradicts this assumption?

Find Counter Evidence

You've probably spent years convincing yourself that people are mean and the world is a dangerous place. Social anxiety has become your coping strategy. Now it's time for a change. Instead of finding reasons to believe your faulty thinking, seek evidence to contradict it.

Leave Emotions out of the Equation

The main reason why people who experience social anxiety find it difficult to cope with negative thinking is because of their emotions. Experts refer to them as 'hot cognitions'. In other words, some of your negative thoughts are accompanied by emotions (fear, worry, etc.) that impair your rational thinking. Each time you choose to question a certain thought, leave

emotions aside. This is the main reason why we put so much emphasis on keeping a thoughts journal. You can use it to focus solely on thoughts and avoid mixing them with emotions.

Separate Yourself From Your Behavior

A wise man once said "criticize the action, not the person". One of the main reasons why socially anxious individuals are so afraid of interacting with others is because they take things personally. Receiving criticism from your boss, wife, friends or other people is inevitable.

Unfortunately, social anxiety makes you extra vulnerable to other people's opinions. For example, if someone tells you that your presentation was a bit confusing, you can either take it personally and feel offended, or accept it as valuable feedback.

There's No Failure, Only Feedback

Another reason why those of us who experience social anxiety are easily disturbed by negative thinking is our tendency to perceive failure as something completely bad. In fact, this pattern is also quite popular among those who deal with depression and other anxiety-related conditions.

Question and Question Again

As we mentioned earlier, questioning is the key exercise. What does failure mean to you? Why is it so unbearable? Can you see it from a different perspective? In the end, everyone interprets failure as something negative, but rational people choose to see it as an opportunity to grow and perfect their skills.

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