Negative thoughts and the link to feelings and behaviour

Just as positive thoughts can impact how we feel, negative thoughts can affect our mood and behaviour sometimes more than we realise. When we feel upset – such as sad, angry, lonely, or hopeless – we are almost always having negative thoughts. We may not notice them at the time, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t there.

In order to learn how to manage our mood and behaviour when we feel distressed, we need to pay attention to negative thoughts.

Thoughts determine our reaction to everyday life, whether it be a challenging situation or ‘normal’ day to day occurrences. For example, you know you need to go for a run/exercise – think of the difference theses two thoughts can make to how you feel; ‘I’m not going to be able to do this, I’m too tired and it’s going to be too hard’ versus ‘I’m going to do this, it will be done within the hour and I’ll feel so much better for doing it’. Each thought process is powerful and demonstrates the power we have over our own thoughts and feelings. Therefore learning to manage your thoughts can have an impact upon how you feel.

The starting point is trying to recognise negative thoughts as this can help us to start to try to manage feelings and behaviour. If we don’t learn to recognise negative thoughts, then we will not learn to make the association between and thoughts and how we feel.

Try these 7 ways to manage (and decrease) your negative thoughts:

1. **Recognise thought distortions**. Our minds have clever and persistent ways of convincing us of something that isn't really true. These inaccurate thoughts reinforce negative thinking. If you can recognise them, you can learn to challenge them.

Here are four common thought distortions:

*Black and white thinking* - Seeing everything as one way or another, without any in between or seeing a compromise.

*Personalising* - Assuming you are to blame for anything that goes wrong, like thinking someone did not smile at you because you did something to upset her. (It's more likely that person is having a hard day and her mood had nothing to do with you.)

*Filter thinking* - Choosing to see only the negative side of a situation.

*Catastrophising* - Assuming the worst possible outcome is going to happen and failing to look for any positives.

2**. Challenge negative thoughts**. Whenever you have a distorted thought, stop and evaluate whether it is accurate. Think about how you would respond if a friend spoke about herself that way. You would probably offer a good rebuttal to his or her negative view. Apply the same logic to your own thoughts. Ask yourself if you are assuming the worst will happen or blaming yourself for something that has not gone the way you wanted. And then think about other possible outcomes or reasons that something turned out differently than you hoped.

3. **Take a break from negative thoughts**. It is possible to learn how to separate from negative thoughts. One way to do this is to allow yourself a certain amount of time (maybe five minutes) with the thought. Then take a break from focusing on it and move on with your day.

4**. Release judgment**. We all judge ourselves and others, usually unconsciously. Constantly comparing ourselves to other people or comparing our lives to some ideal breeds dissatisfaction. When you are able to let go of judgment (not easy, but possible), you will likely feel more at ease. Some ways to take a break from judgmental thoughts include recognising your own reaction, observing it, and then letting it go. Another helpful technique is to "positive judge." When you notice you are negatively judging a person, yourself, or a situation, look for a positive quality, too.

5. **Practice gratitude**. Research shows that feeling grateful has a big impact on your levels of positivity and happiness. Even when you are experiencing a challenging time in your life, you can usually find things (even small things) to be grateful for. Noticing the things that are going well and making you feel happy will keep you in touch with them. Keeping a gratitude journal and writing a few things in it every day is one easy and effective way to do this.

6. **Focus on your strengths**. It's human nature to dwell on the negative and overlook the positive. The more you can practice focusing on your strengths and not dwelling on mistakes you've made, the easier it will be to feel positive about yourself and the direction your life is taking. If you find yourself thinking harsh thoughts about your personality or actions, take a moment to stop and think about something you like about yourself.

7. **Seek out professional support** if you are unable to manage your thoughts or find they are interfering with your ability to meet your daily responsibilities or enjoy life. Professional intervention can help you explore your thinking patterns, reduce emotional suffering and experience self-growth.

If you require further support, please contact your GP or in an emergency, call 999. You can find further mental health helplines on the separate factsheet, link HERE?