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Managing Your Thinking – You Can Train Your ANTs

Ok admit it, that little voice inside your head is constantly talking to you right?

And often that little voice is not very helpful at all. In fact, that little voice often stops us from stepping outside our comfort zone and achieving our goals.

We can start to recognise that what often gets in the way, is our own mindset and thinking.

After all – "A Belief is just a thought that we keep on having!"

We need to recognise that it is our ANTs which tend to crawl all over us and under our skin and get in the way of us having more productive outcomes.

What are ANTs you ask? An ANT is an Automatic Negative Thought. Basically, it is an unhelpful thinking style.

When we experience an emotion, it is normally preceded by a number of unhelpful self-statements and thoughts. Often there is a pattern to these thoughts, and we have usually been thinking them over and over again in response to the same or similar situations. In other words, they have become automatic, so we call them Automatic Negative Thoughts or…. ANTs.

So, ask yourself……….Do you let your ANTs crawl all over you?

How many times a day do you say counter-productive things to yourself or hear others say things like:

- I can't believe I did that!

- I'm never going to get all this work done!

- There's so much to do! Where do I start?

- Why do these things always happen to me?

- No one cares what I think!

- No one will support me!

- What's the point of all this anyway?

Our thoughts are created by our mind, which is constantly helping us to make sense of the world around us, describing what's happening and trying to help us interpret events, sights, sounds and feelings.

Without even realising it, we are interpreting information and giving our own meanings to everything happening around us. We then make decisions based on these interpretations.

Consider some of the categories of typical Automatic Negative Thoughts we engage in:

Over Generalising

Drawing conclusions on limited evidence and making sweeping negative conclusions that go way beyond the current situation. "Nothing good ever happens to me", "nothing ever works".

All or Nothing Thinking

You view situations in only two categories instead of on a continuum, often called "black and white" thinking. "If I'm not a total success, then I must be a failure", "either I do it right, or not at all".

Catastrophising

You predict the future negatively without considering more likely outcomes "I'll be so upset; I won't be able to function at all".

Mental Filter

Only paying attention to certain kinds of evidence. Always noticing your failures, but never your successes.

Disqualifying the Positive

Discounting the good things that happen or that you have done for some other reason, "that doesn't count", "I was just lucky".

Mind Reading

You believe you know what others are thinking, failing to consider other possible scenarios, "he's thinking I don't know the first thing about this project".

"Should and Must" Statements

You have a precise, fixed idea of how you or others should behave and overestimate how bad it is that these expectations are not met, "it's terrible that I made that mistake, I should always produce my best work".

Consider your ANTs from the list. Which three are you "most guilty" of using when responding to scenarios?

Now, if we recognise that our thinking and our automatic thoughts lead to our emotional response, our challenge is to manage more successfully our thoughts and modify or "reframe" this first "automatic" thought.

Basically, what we want to do is turn our ANTs into PETs.

PETs are our Performance Enhancing Thoughts.

Notice the P in PETs does not stand for positive. It's going to sound strange coming from a psychologist, but we can't always put a positive spin on everything. What we can do is think realistically about a situation rather than negatively.

Consider a situation in which you experienced an extreme emotional response. How did you think and feel? Where you engaging in an automatic thought you can now identify? Could you turn your ANT into a PET?

See the worksheet following to try and identify your typical ANTs.

How could you train them to be PETs?

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MANAGING YOUR ANTs
(AUTOMATIC NEGATIVE THOUGHTS)

ANT	COGNTITIVE DISTORTION	REFRAME
I CAN'T STAND THIS	CATASTROPHISING	I'M ANXIOUS BUT I CAN WORK THROUGH IT
I'M HOPELESS AT THIS	ALL OR NOTHING THINKING	I CAN'T DO IT..... YET BUT I CAN CONTINUE TRYING
I FEEL HOPELESS	EMOTIONAL REASONING	MY EMOTIONS ARE DATA THAT GIVE ME INFORMATION SO I CAN TAKE ACTION
I SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO BETTER AT THIS	SHOULD/MUST STATEMENTS	I'D PREFER TO DO WELL, BUT PROGRESS IS BETTER THAN PERFECTION
I'M SO STUPID	LABELLING	I'M LEARNING
THIS IS ALL MY FAULT	PERSONALISATION	HOW CAN I WORK THROUGH THIS?
THIS IS UNBEARABLE	LOW FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE	I CAN ASK FOR HELP TO GIVE ME SOME STRATEGIES
NOTHING GOOD EVER HAPPENS	OVERGENERALISING	WHAT CAN I IDENTIFY I'M ACTUALLY GRATEFUL FOR?

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