

How do I avoid negative thoughts?

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I remember walking up on stage to receive my doctoral degree, it was one of the proudest moments of my life. # But as I was going up on stage I had nagging thought, "They're going to figure out I don't really deserve this." # Needless to say, staying optimistic isn't always easy, negative thoughts can haunt us even in the best of situations. # To be fair, such thoughts serve a purpose, including protecting us from the various dangers of the world, both physical and social.

To aid in this process, the body and the brain have plenty of hormones and neurotransmitters to guide you in this process. # A large reason why we hate making mistakes, is that as powerful as the happy biochemicals are, they do not linger in the body nearly as long as the unhappy biochemicals (chiefly cortisol)¹⁵. # Consequently, making a mistake tends to be harder on our physiology, in an attempt to make a lasting impression on our brain¹⁶.

As we are growing up, we encounter situations that trigger those biochemicals, which we're then left to interpret. # Our prior experiences with others along with our inborn personality traits shape those interpretations. # For example, if you do something as a child to make your friend mad, your initial reaction may just be, "I guess I better not do that again". ## However, if we come from a

home where a parent is frequently mad at the things we do and/or if we have more anxious temperament to begin with, our reaction to making our friend mad is going to be that much more powerful, with stronger feelings of guilt and shame¹⁷. # At this point, we will take our interpretation one step further, creating labels about ourselves – "I'm such a horrible person for making him mad" (rather than just acknowledging it as a simple mistake) and/or assuming our friend is a horrible person.

#It should be noted, that for the sake of simplicity, the brain likes to create patterns to make thinking easier. # Rather than taking the time to reflect and consider each situation before coming up with a judgement, to save on time and energy it is easier for the mind to skip straight to judgement. # Over time we can enter what psychologists call, "confirmation bias", wherein we start making up our minds about our subject, such as how we see ourselves, and then interpret any new evidence as a confirmation of that self-perception¹⁸. # Over time, as this pattern deepens, we can see any self-mishap as an indictment of ourselves.

One of the first steps to overcoming our negative self-talk is to identify them as they are happening. # They can be hard to catch, because they can take place in various ways. # Based on the work of Aaron Beck and later David Burns, the following is an abbreviated list of the more common "cognitive distortions"¹⁹²⁰:

- **Overgeneralizing** – Taking an isolated negative event and assuming it to be the overall pattern of your life, often while using such terms as "always" or "never". # *After failing an exam, thinking, "Now I'll never get into grad school, and never get a decent job."*
- **Minimization** – Downplaying your strengths or positive qualities, which disallows you from owning your victories. # *After a triumph thinking, "Oh, it's no big deal, anyone could have accomplished that, I was just lucky."*
- **Filtering** – Ignoring all positive aspects of a situation while exclusively focusing on the negatives. # *After finishing a great date with your spouse, you notice that they seemed a little unhappy about the dessert. # Later you reflect what a horrible date that was – or maybe how horrible your spouse is.*
- **Comparison** – Comparing one part of another's life to your own, and assuming your situation worse (social media doesn't help with this). # *"She's on vacation again. Her life is so much more fun than mine."*
- **All-or-Nothing Thinking/Polarized Thinking** – Approaching life in terms of absolutes, without

allowing any in-betweens. This form of horriblizing can rob you of motivation. # *"I can't believe I got a B- on that exam. I am such an idiot, why do I keep trying?"* It can also contribute to unrealistic expectations and resentment over other's imperfections. *Thinking your roommate is the worst person, for drinking your milk without asking.*

- **Mindreading** – Assuming you know what the other person is thinking without any supportive evidence. *"I can tell by the look on his face that he's annoyed at me" - even if he might just be thinking about the weather.*
- **Personalization** – Believing you're responsible for people or events that are largely outside of your control. This thinking can cause self-blame when others make mistakes, which leads to anxiety and attempts to control other's lives. *"It's my fault my adult son is overweight, I should remind him to eat better."*