

10 Steps for Transforming Negative Thoughts into Positive Beliefs

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“We can always choose to perceive things differently. You can focus on what’s wrong in your life or you can focus on what’s right” – **Marianne Williamson**

We have the ability to create our own reality. For the most part, we can look at a situation and see the good or we can look at the same situation and choose to see the bad. Often times the lens we use to view what’s happening is filtered by our thoughts.

Positive thoughts create more positive circumstances. Alternatively, negative thoughts contribute to feelings of dissatisfaction and disappointment. Therefore, changing our negative thoughts is essential to achieve happiness and peace.

The following are the most common negative thinking behaviors. Becoming aware of these is essential to transforming negative thoughts into positive beliefs.

1. Stay away from “all-or nothing” thinking.

When we slip into “all-or-nothing” thinking we see our circumstances as either black or white with not much in between. By shifting to someplace in the gray, a fresh perspective is created that helps us to realize more options do exist.

To lead an emotionally healthy life we need to have balanced emotions. Words like: *always, never, impossible, terrible* and *perfect*, are rigid and allow little room for interpretation or flexibility. Instead, when we live somewhere in the middle then we are in a better position to find sturdier footing which will lead to improved balance.

Look for the gray in these statements:

- I can be an intelligent person and still do something stupid.
- I can love my wife and still be angry with her sometimes.
- There are parts of my life I enjoy and there are parts of my life that create stress.
- My children bring me joy and they sometimes drive me crazy.

The most important word in each sentence is *and*. The word *and* suggests a balance; it paints a shade of gray in our lives.

2. Avoid the temptation to over generalize.

Overgeneralization is best characterized when we believe if one bad thing happens, then everything else is doomed to go poorly.

Think of over generalized statements as exaggerations. For example, “You never listen to me. He always interrupts me. She always thinks she’s right. Everybody thinks I’m stupid.”

The biggest overgeneralization red flags are words like *never*, *always*, *should* or *everybody*. Understand an over generalized statement is another form of a negative thought. Re-think your words and reconsider the circumstance. Attempt to find something positive.

For example, the over generalized statement of “You never listen to me.” Can be reframed to, “There have been times in the past when you were very attentive and I

felt as though you heard me. At this moment, however, I'm experiencing you as not being interested in what I have to say."

The second statement is more truthful and less exaggerated. As a result, a more positive outcome can be expected.

3. What you rather be right or happy?

I can be very stubborn. At times my stubbornness has cost me. It has caused me to miss the opportunity to accept an apology or consider a different point-of-view. I was more determined to be right than to be happy.

The need to be right cultivates more negative thoughts because of our unwillingness to let go of whatever the issue was in the first place. To find some peace and happiness, sometimes we just need to let it go.

4. Change your mental filter.

Persistent pessimism can develop into a habit if we are not careful. Left unattended, chronic negative thinking can begin to

shape the way we see the world. The glass will always be half-empty, for example.

We can begin to change our mental filter by allowing positive thoughts to sift through it too. Try to see the good in every circumstance. A long line at the grocery store is a wonderful opportunity to chat with your partner or child; a stressful time at work will give you a better chance to realize the inner strength you possess; and the world's current economy is a great time to get back to developing and maintaining a budget for your personal expenses.

The adage, "When God hands you lemons; make lemonade," is the perfect reminder to be aware of the mental filter we use and the importance to transform it from a negative one to something more positive.

5. Watch your tendency for jumping to conclusions.

When confronted with what might appear to be an unwelcomed circumstance, consider taking a deep breath; a full step back, to look at the event at a more holistic level in order to get all of the information.

In my house, Mary Beth and I have an expression we use with our children: “What’s the rest of the story?” When they come home with a failing grade and begin to blame the teacher, we ask, “What’s the rest of the story?”

Often times we learn there was little effort put into studying or there was missing work that contributed to the poor grade. The point is we don’t take much at face value until we seek a better understanding of really what’s happening.

Even with more serious issues, my wife and I have find by falling back to this question provides us with a better opportunity to see the whole picture. This additional information is invaluable when it comes to how we react and respond.

By asking, “What’s the rest of the story,” we are in a better position to monitor our negative thoughts and keep them from trumping what is really going on. The clarity we gain empowers us to have a more rational and positive reaction

6. Don’t should on yourself.

When we *should* on ourselves we are issuing negative judgments about our actions and behaviors.

Consider the following statements: “I *should* be a better parent; I *should* be making more money and I *should* be happier.”

These *should* statements suggest our current status is not good enough. These thoughts are negative and prevent us from seeing what is positive. *Should* statements put our thoughts and attitudes in a box and constrain us from seeing other solutions. Remember, it’s a matter of balance.

We can be a good parent without having to be a perfect parent; we can provide for our families, financially, and still possess the desire to earn more; and we can be happy with all we have and continue to look for ways to bring more happiness into our lives.

7. Be aware of emotional reasoning.

Not many of us are like the character Spock from *Star Trek* who is consistently

logical and rational no matter the circumstance. Even though we often have a rational response to a difficult event, we also have a tendency to slip into emotional reasoning when confronted with an especially challenging situation.

A good example of emotional reasoning goes something like, “I feel shame therefore I must be a bad person.” On the contrary, there are many very good people who feel shame – like all of us.

Just because we are experiencing a certain uncomfortable emotion doesn't mean our character, our soul, has been downgraded. It just means for that moment, in that small space of time, we feel a certain way about ourselves.

When we allow ourselves to be human and give our spirit the grace and mercy it deserves, we are in a better position to reframe self-limiting thoughts and keep them from manifesting to the point they begin to define who we are.

8. Try not to take everything personally.

It may be hard to hear, but not everything is about you and not everything is about me, either. Fear, paranoia and perhaps a measure of insecurity can lead us to believe the way other people react, or the things they say, are directed to us. Sometimes people are insensitive, judgmental or just plain in a bad mood.

One of my biggest challenges is when a person makes a negative comment about one of my projects, is to keep my temptation in check and not internalize the comment. What I often hear is I'm not good or effective – not the project.

What I hear is also rooted in old, negative tapes playing my head. My task, then, is to replace these old tapes with newer, more positive ones that suggest I'm capable, well-meaning and successful regardless of what someone might say.

9. Dial back from magnifying a problem.

There is perception and then there is reality. Our negative thoughts start to churn when we confuse the two.

Seeing a situation for what it really is instead of what it *feels* like can help us stay grounded. Magnifying a problem only gives the problem more energy and provides the opportunity for the situation to become larger than it was ever intended to be.

My wife and I have been challenged by some of the recent decisions our younger son has made. While Andrew is a moral and well-intentioned young man, like any 17-year-old, he has been making some questionable choices. Rather than assuming our son is heading down an irreversible path, our approach has been to increase our communication with him and offer a dose of empathy and support as well as some needed direction.

The results have been productive – especially for Andrew. Mary Beth and I elected to focus on the positive aspects of our son. We addressed the problem with the intensity it deserved and did not allow our anger or fear to guide us.

Not that we do everything right with our children (trust me, we have made plenty of mistakes), but in this situation we made the conscious decision to deal with the facts

and not allow our negative thoughts or emotions to get in the way.

10. Celebrate.

Celebrate the good things when they happen. Don't simply dismiss them or minimize them.

There is no question some days have a few setbacks, a couple of obstacles and sometimes pain. There are even some days when we feel as though someone has emptied our hearts of the passion and strength we need for life. So, on the days we are blessed and have positive things happen, no matter how small and insignificant they may seem, allow yourself the time to enjoy them and then be filled back up by them.

Like attracts like. Positive thoughts and happiness create more of the same.

Thanks

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