

TWU Counseling Center

Stress Reduction Using Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking

These three related tools are useful in combating negative thinking. Negative thinking causes stress because it damages your confidence that you are equal to the task you face. Negative thoughts occur when you put yourself down, criticize yourself for errors, doubt your abilities, expect failure, etc. Negative thinking is the negative side of suggestion - it damages confidence, harms performance and paralyzes mental skills.

Thought Awareness

Thought awareness is the process by which you observe your thoughts for a time, perhaps when under stress, and become aware of what is going through your head. It is best not to suppress any thoughts - just let them run their course while you observe them. Watch for negative thoughts while you observe your 'stream of consciousness'. Normally these appear and disappear being barely noticed. Normally you will not know that they exist. Examples of common negative thoughts are:

- worries about how you appear to other people ("They will think I'm stupid.")
- a preoccupation with the symptoms of stress ("I can't stop thinking about how tense my shoulders are.")
- dwelling on consequences of poor performance ("If I fail this test, my parents will be so disappointed.")
- self criticism ("I am not as smart as she is.")
- feelings of inadequacy ("I feel like I will never understand this material.")

Make a note of the thought, and then let the stream of consciousness run on. Thought awareness is the first step in the process of eliminating negative thoughts - you cannot counter thoughts you do not know you think.

Rational Thinking

Once you are aware of your negative thoughts, write them down and review them rationally. See whether the thoughts have any basis in reality. Often you find that when you properly challenge negative thoughts they are obviously wrong. Often they persist only because they escape notice.

Positive Thinking and Affirmation

You may find it useful to counter negative thoughts with positive affirmations. You can use affirmations to build confidence and change negative behavior patterns into positive ones. You can base affirmations on clear, rational assessments of fact, and use them to undo the damage that negative thinking may have done to your self-confidence. Examples of affirmations are:

- "I can do this."
- "I can achieve my goals."
- "I am completely myself and people will like me for myself."
- "I am completely in control of my life."
- "I learn from my mistakes. They increase the basis of experience on which I can draw."
- "I am a good valued person in my own right."

Traditionally people have advocated positive thinking almost recklessly, as if it is a solution to everything. It should be used with common sense. First decide rationally what goals you can realistically attain with hard work, and then use positive thinking to reinforce these.

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