

ANTS

Automatic Negative Thoughts

Daniel Amen, MD, has identified nine different kinds of ANT species, or ways your thoughts can distort incoming information to make you feel bad. Here are four ANT species:

Mind reading — predicting you know that another person is thinking something negative about you without them telling you. I often tell my patients that, "A negative look from someone else may mean nothing more than he or she is constipated. You don't know. You can't read minds. I have 25 years of training in human behavior and I still can't read anyone's mind."

Fortune telling — predicting a bad outcome to a situation before it has occurred. Your mind makes happen what it sees. Unconsciously, predicting failure will often cause failure. For example, if you say, "I know I will fail the test," then you will likely not study hard enough and fail the test.

Always or never thinking — this is where you think in words like always, never, every time, or everyone. These thoughts are overgeneralizations which can alter behavior. For example, I have a friend who asked out an attractive woman. She turned him down. He told himself that no one will ever go out with him again. This ANT prevented him from asking out anyone else for over nine months.

Guilt beatings — being overrun by thoughts of "I should have done... I'm bad because.... I must do better at... I have to..."). Guilt is powerful at making us feel bad. It is a lousy motivator of behavior. You do not have to believe every thought that goes through your head. It's important to think about your thoughts to see if they help you or they hurt you. Unfortunately, if you never challenge your thoughts you just "believe them" as if they were true. ANTs can take over and infest your brain. Develop an internal anteater to hunt down and devour the negative thoughts that are ruining your life.

Once you learn about your thoughts, you can choose to think good thoughts and feel good or you can choose to think bad thoughts and feel lousy. You can train your thoughts to be positive and hopeful or you can just allow them to be negative and upset you. That's right, it's up to you! You can learn how to change your thoughts and optimize your brain. One way to learn how to change your thoughts is to notice them when they are negative and talk back to them. If you can correct negative thoughts, you take away their power over you. When you think a negative thought without challenging it, your mind believes it and your brain reacts to it.

1. Is it true that...?
2. Can you ABSOLUTELY know that it's true that...?
3. How do you feel when you have the thought, "_____”?
4. Who would I be without the thought, "_____”?
5. Ok, now turn the thought around: What is the opposite of "_____”?
 - Question #1: Is it true that you can't wait until you are 5 years old to get your ears pierced. "Yes," she cried, rubbing her eyes.
 - OK ... Question #2: Can you ABSOLUTELY know that it is true that you can't wait until you are 5 years old? Initially she said yes, she couldn't possibly wait. Then I asked her if she thought she would die if she couldn't get her ears pierced? Surprised by the comment, she rolled her eyes at me and looked at me like I was stupid and said "Of course NOT...How silly." I smiled.
 - OK ... Question #3: How do you feel when you have the thought "I can't wait until I am 5 years old. It is too long?" I feel sad because my ears are not cute and I feel mad because I want it done now.
 - OK ... Question #4: Who would I be without the thought "I can't wait until I am 5?" I would feel painless ... she said.
 - OK ... now turn the thought around: "I can't wait until I am 5. What is the opposite of the thought?" Here we spent a few minutes talking about opposites, such as big and small and hot and cold. She understood the concept and said "I can wait until I am 5." And then she jumped off my lap and went off to play with the dog.