

# A.N.T.s

## Automatic Negative Thoughts<sup>1</sup>

Automatic negative thoughts are unproductive thoughts arising, often, from core beliefs. If someone believes that they don't matter, then they interpret their circumstances through that belief – focusing on evidence that supports their belief and discounting evidence that does not. If someone believes they are not safe, then they look at the world through that lens.

If you are the one locked into an ANT consider the advice below each example.

**Horriblizing** - imagining that terrible and unbearable things will happen; some call this 'fortune telling', "*I'm going to fail*" "*It will never happen*"; a related area is brooding on "*What if...*" questions.

Practice doubting your doubts; imagining ways through the problem; looking at it from God's POV.

Focus attention on 'what is' more than 'what might be.'

**All-or-Nothing thinking** – polarized views of reality; "*everybody hates me*" "*...a complete waste of time*"

Discipline your thinking to find reality between extremes; What false belief drives this thinking?

**Mind reading** – believing that you know people's thoughts & motivations; "*You did that to control me*"

Let them explain their own thoughts in their own words. 1<sup>st</sup>, share what you notice; 2<sup>nd</sup> ask them to help you understand what they are/were thinking or feeling; 3<sup>rd</sup> summarize what you heard them say asking, "Did I get that right?" and 4<sup>th</sup> thank them for letting you know. Do not dwell on whether they are honest or not this will just throw you back into mindreading.

**Overgeneralization** – making current problems into universal ones; "*Nothing ever goes right for me.*"; "*I'm just a terrible...*" "*Everybody thinks I'm a...*"; **labeling** is a related form of this; assigning permanent global negative qualities to self or others – "*I'm such a loser.*" "*She is a bitch*"

Keeping discrete events discrete; sticking with specific critiques or problems

**Demanding** – feeling that you must, should, ought to, have to, need to...some demand or expectation we have for others; self-pity is a reactive form of demanding.<sup>2</sup>

Ask for what you want; Accept the situation you're in; Choose to sacrifice rather than assume a victim pose.

**Mental Filtering** - disqualifying the positive; globalizing the negative; an over-focus on the negative and an under-focus or even denial of the positive.

**Low frustration tolerance** – Treating difficult things as intolerable things; caving in to fear, anxiety, laziness, low motivation, etc.

Recognize how you might do this to recruit help instead of asking for help or deciding that you are able to do unpleasant or difficult things;

**Personalizing** – Feeling guilt, anger, shame, anxiety, fear, etc. over events that are out of your control – a false belief in personal responsibility

Learning to regard other's problems as their problems not yours; Recognizing that you have some control just not all control or no control.

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<sup>1</sup> This list is not exhaustive. There are similarities between some of them. The point is not to provide a complete taxonomy of A.N.T.s but to notice patterns of thought that stop thinking. You may notice that these things drive our offensive & defensive behaviors.

<sup>2</sup> We may not demand peace and quiet but we feel sorry for ourselves that we don't get it.

If they are the one locked into an ANT remember that they are stressed and likely to feel alternately powerless (victim – freezing; fleeing) or powerful (survivor – fighting). So, you need to resist responding to them with absolute statements or pushy behaviors. This will only make things worse.

Instead, you must help them feel heard & understood while shepherding them toward what they do know and what they can control (thrivers – some insight, some control).

- **Clarify** so that they feel heard

“Seek first to understand then to be understood.” Steven Covey, habit 5

Set your agenda aside and prayerfully clarify what they are thinking/feeling.

Feedback what you’re hearing them say and ask if you’ve gotten it right.

- **Validate** so that they feel understood and accepted

Rejecting, ignoring, judging or denying their right to feel what they feel stops progress.

They feel what they feel because they believe what they believe, crave what they crave and experience what they experience (e.g. triggers). In discovering, naming and empathizing you are not saying, “It’s right for you to feel this way.” You are simply making it easy for them to share.

For example, if she says, “You didn’t come home on time because you would rather be a big deal at work than be with me.” You can reject the feeling by saying, “I was late because my boss asked me to do a project as I was walking out the door. What do you want me to do? Get fired so we can hang out full time?” OR “You could say, “I’m bummed to hear you say that I don’t want to be with you. What have I done or not done that leaves you feeling that way?” (i.e. back to the first bullet...listen, listen, listen)

- **Objectify** the problem so that they can bring some understanding and control to bear on things.

Work toward objectivity.

Not all of these fit a given situation but find what works for yours. For instance, if she’s angry at you, asking for her % certainty will feel like you are baiting her – bloodletting will follow.

- If their ANT is about you ask them if they would let you share your perspective (i.e. assuming you’ve spent enough time clarifying and validating).

“I can see why you might have come to that conclusion but I’m not seeing it the same way. Would you be willing to let me tell you what I believe I was thinking?”

Notice you are not saying, “I can see why you might have come to that conclusion but you’re totally off. Let me tell you how it really is.”

- If their ANT is about something or someone else

- Check their level of certainty

“How sure are you about this?” “What % likelihood would you give this thought?”

- Help them distinguish fact from impression

“What do we know for sure about this – what are the facts?”

Prompt them with some you can think of if they run out. Including and especially facts about God.

- Ask them to provide disconfirming evidence

“What facts suggest that this might **not** happen the way you fear?”

- Ask them if they can think of an experiment – something they could do that would strengthen or weaken their ANT hypothesis.

“So, you’re pretty sure Karen is angry with you.<sup>3</sup> What might you do to check your conclusion?”

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<sup>3</sup> Maybe through clarifying and validating, you’ve already helped her move from, “Karen hates me and doesn’t want to be a friend anymore”