

# GETTING OUT OF THINKING TRAPS



It's easy to fall into negative thinking patterns and spend time bullying yourself, dwelling on the past, or worrying about the future. It's part of how we're wired – the human brain reacts more intensely to negative events than to positive ones and is more likely to remember insults than praise. During tough times, negative thoughts are especially likely to spiral out of control. When these thoughts make something out to be worse in your head than it is in reality, they are called cognitive distortions.

## COMMON COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

**Overgeneralization:** Making a broad statement based off one situation or piece of evidence.

**Personalization:** Blaming yourself for events beyond your control; taking things personally when they aren't actually connected to you.

**Filtering:** Focusing on the negative details of a situation while ignoring the positive.

**All-or-Nothing Thinking:** Only seeing the extremes of a situation.

**Catastrophizing:** Blowing things out of proportion; dwelling on the worst possible outcomes.

**Jumping to Conclusions:** Judging or deciding something without all the facts.

**Emotional Reasoning:** Thinking that however you feel is fully and unarguably true. **Discounting the Positive:** Explaining all positives away as luck or coincidence.

**"Should" Statements:** Making yourself feel guilty by pointing out what you should or shouldn't be doing, feeling, or thinking.

## TIPS FOR CHALLENGING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS



**Reframe.** Think of a different way to view the situation. If your negative thought is "I can't do anything right," a kinder way to reframe it is, "I messed up, but nobody's perfect," or a more constructive thought is "I messed up, but now I know to prepare more for next time." It can be hard to do this when you're feeling down on yourself, so ask yourself what you'd tell your best friend if they were saying those things about themselves.



**Prove yourself wrong.** The things you do impact how you feel – what actions can you take to combat your negative thoughts? For instance, if you're telling yourself you aren't smart because you don't understand how the stock market works, learn more about a subject you understand and enjoy, like history. If you feel like no one cares about you, call a friend. Give yourself evidence that these thoughts aren't entirely true.



**Counter negative thoughts with positive ones.** When you catch your inner dialogue being mean to you, make yourself say something nice to balance it out. This may feel cheesy at first and self-love can be hard, so don't give up if it feels awkward in the beginning. Name things you love, like, or even just don't hate about yourself – we all have to start somewhere!



**Remember: thoughts aren't facts.** Your thoughts and feelings are valid, but they aren't always reality. You might feel ugly, but that doesn't mean you *are*. Often times we can be our own worst enemies – other people are seeing us in a much nicer light than how we see ourselves.

### Sources

<sup>1</sup>Proprietary data. MHAScreening.org. 2020.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Matthews, G., Wells, A. (2000). Attention, automaticity, and affective disorder. *Behavior Modification*, 24, 69-93.

## FAST FACTS



Of people who took an anxiety screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) in 2020, 64% felt afraid, as if something awful might happen at least half of the time or nearly every day.<sup>1</sup>



Half of people who took a depression screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) in 2020 felt that they were a failure or had let themselves or their families down nearly every day.<sup>2</sup>



One study found that 85% of what we worry about never happens at all, and in the 15% of times where worries came true, 79% of people handled the difficulty better than expected, or learned a valuable lesson.<sup>3</sup>

TAKING A MENTAL HEALTH SCREEN IS ONE WAY TO WORK ON YOUR MENTAL HEALTH. VISIT [MHASCREENING.ORG](https://mhascreening.org) TO CHECK YOUR SYMPTOMS.



It's free, confidential, and anonymous. Once you have your results, MHA will give you information and resources to help you start to feel better.

# DEALING WITH THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO

Going to the worst-case scenario (aka catastrophic thinking or thinking the worst) is one of the most common thinking traps we fall into. Thinking about the worst-case scenario can help you feel like you're preparing to protect yourself from getting hurt in the future or to imagine what is the worst thing that can happen so you can reflect and know you can survive no matter what.

Unfortunately, problems come up when you have worst-case scenario thoughts and you're not aware of them enough that they control you, vs you controlling them. This pattern of thinking can result in circular thinking (or ruminating) in ways that pull you into a rut, bring your feelings down, make depression worse, cause you to avoid your responsibilities, and increase anxiety.

## EXAMPLES OF WORST-CASE SCENARIO THOUGHTS:



Use the lines below to list out any and all worst-case scenario thoughts you find yourself having. Don't worry about whether it's "truly" a worst-case scenario thought...if it's bothering you and you want to jot it down, jot it down.

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**LOOK AT THE THOUGHTS ABOVE. PICK THREE THAT STAND OUT THAT YOU WANT TO ADDRESS. WRITE THEM BELOW.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**QUESTION EACH THOUGHT BY EXPLORING THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS.**

- Are you sure the thought is true or will happen?
- Is there any evidence it is true?
- Is there evidence that it is not true?
- Is the thought more rooted in your feelings or reality?
- If it is reality, are you able to cope with it? Have you coped with it before?

## FINDING HEALTHIER THOUGHTS

Looking at the three thoughts above, what do you need to say to yourself or how can you change the above thoughts so that you feel better instead of worse? These are called "reframed thoughts."

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Write your reframed thoughts on paper or post its and put them where you are most likely to struggle with worst-case scenario thinking. Examples include by your bed, in the bathroom, in your car, on your phone, or in a journal.