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Turning Negative Thoughts Into Positive Ones

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There it is again. That inner voice saying "I can't do it," "I'm no good at it," or "I'm too clumsy," "Better not try anything new."

It's negative "self-talk" and we all do it. But coping with negative thoughts gives us options -- like choosing to see our glass as half empty or half full. The trick, many psychologists tell us, is to not fight these thoughts, but to understand them with compassion because if you ignore them, they'll return with a vengeance.

"Listening to the negative voices in your life is the first step to getting them out of your life," says [Caryn Bienstock](#), who has been a therapist for 34 years in Darien. "People tell me 'I always hear the word stupid every time I try something new.' I ask them how old they feel when they hear that voice."

We carry around all sorts of unconscious demons, many from childhood. It could be the admonishing voice of a parent or third-grade teacher that never got erased. Bienstock tries to get patients to "change up" the repetitive, internal voices and create a new way of looking at old behavior by asking, "Is this (voice) serving me well? Is there another way to look at it?" She advises re-tooling by telling yourself, "Well I'm trying" instead of "I can't."

Bienstock also uses light hypnosis to induce a trance-like state where people are more open to hearing their inner, negative voice as well as positive suggestions.

"I'll be late for the meeting. Everyone will see that and they won't like me. I'll get excluded from the group."

Negative thought patterns reveal themselves when people buy in to "all or nothing thinking," or if they make broad generalizations, jump to conclusions, blow things out of

proportion or turn small problems into monstrous ones. Negative thought patterns generate more negative thoughts: if you tell yourself you feel awful, you will feel awful. The question is: How do you stop this mental agita?

Turning negative thoughts into positive ones isn't easy. Most of the time, we can't really hear that inner, ominous voice lurking in the background. It's like a subliminal sound track looping around in our subconscious. How do we tackle something we don't even know is there?

"Everybody has negative thoughts at some point," says Dr. [Charles Morgan](#), chairman of the department of psychiatry at [Bridgeport Hospital](#). "But it could be more of a cascading event. If you're caught in traffic, you worry about being late for work and then angering your boss. Then you imagine your boss firing you and without a job you see yourself not paying your mortgage and then losing your house."

Morgan says people able to deal with their own dose of negativity can say, "I'm just being ridiculous! I'm not going to be fired for being late once!" For others, coming to grips with that destructive, inner voice is difficult, especially if they are trying to tease it out themselves. In lieu of a friend or a professional giving feedback, Morgan advises using various visualization techniques to tackle negative thoughts. "I teach patients to visualize a stop sign and say to themselves 'Look! I'm doing it again!'"

A typical anxiety-producing situation, such as an upcoming job interview, can be fertile ground for those successive, negative mantras, intoning doubt about your competence. Morgan suggests asking yourself the origin of that uncertain voice and then seeing if you can tune it down and out. "Think of turning down old-time radio knobs or rewinding or fast forwarding a video tape. Find another way to end the story that you're telling yourself."

Michele Lucas, a licensed, clinical social worker in Norwalk, says too much negative self-talk can hold a person back from enjoying life.

"This is a quality-of-life issue," says Lucas, who has been in private practice for more than 18 years. "Most negative stream of consciousness is in the background in everything we do. It increases stress and keeps people from doing things that would improve their lives. The stress can escalate to higher levels and put us over the edge."

Lucas helps break the negative cycle using HeartMath, an approach that focuses on intuition and emotional processing. Scientific research done over the last 20 years by the [Institute of HeartMath](#) in Boulder Creek, Calif., shows that the heart sends the brain an enormous amount of information and that these heart-emitting signals can influence perception and higher cognitive functions. Basically, it gives credence to the old adage "listen to your heart," or "trust your gut."

"Our heart has a logic that's different from our head. The heart informs us spontaneously, but most of us don't listen," says Lucas.

HeartMath directs patients to imagine breathing through their heart. "It accesses what I call the intelligence of their heart," says Lucas. "When we recognize a negative thought, we can stop it immediately by directing our attention to our heart. HeartMath isn't telling a person to change, but rather to back away from the negative thought and consult the heart as an alternative."

"I'm an idiot," "I'm no good."

"You have to be careful when general statements start to lead your life," says Alejandra Hochstedler-Stipo, a psychotherapist and program manager for Adult Mental Health at the [St. Vincent Medical Center](#) satellite in Norwalk. "You can be worthless when it comes to dealing with computers, but not about your whole life."

Hochstedler-Stipo developed a process called Finding Myself to help combat negative self-talk as well as focus on accompanying, personal struggles such as overcoming low self-esteem, personal growth impediments and anxiety. "We want you as a patient to think about yourself. Ask yourself what does my 'ME' want?"

Women clients hold a common belief that they have to do everything right, says Hochstedler-Stipo. "I hear women strongly identify with wrong and right. Feeling negative or depressed is 'wrong.'"

Using role play exercises and acting as a mirror for her patients helps change their perception of wrong. "If you think you are an idiot, we go back to who first told you that," she says.

Other visualizations can help us understand the physiological piece of negative thought. For instance, visualize a well-worn, mental path trafficked by an ongoing stream of harmful judgments, a path widened by a lifetime of inner recriminations and self doubt. Suppose you want to stop using that path and find another route. "The old path will cover over while you're creating the new one," says [LuAnn Murphy](#), a licensed, clinical social worker in outpatient behavioral health services at Greenwich Hospital. Murphy uses the path metaphor to steer patients through negative thoughts. The metaphor closely aligns the trail of neurotransmitters, a vital part of our brain chemistry that transmits information.

Murphy uses exercises to slow down the thought process by asking "how accurate is that thought?" or "what's a better way of thinking about this situation?" Her premise is that in a fast-paced world of information overload, it's hard to pick out where thoughts come from. "We're all on automatic pilot," Murphy says, "and we have a certain way of thinking without knowing what's triggering it."

Learning how to move past negative thoughts and wave away those annoying slugs of pessimism are lessons and practices that, if used regularly, are like investments in our state of well-being. They help us stay above the fray, Lucas says, in an intense, fast-paced life.