

# SELF-DEFEATING THOUGHTS & BELIEFS

## Embracing Optimism

Thoughts that come automatically to mind are often negative, irrational, or unrealistic. Although they may seem valid, automatic thoughts can be very deceptive and self-defeating. Being able to identify patterns in your automatic thoughts is a first step. Then you can learn to shift your outlook and emotions in a more positive direction. Can you see yourself in any of these?

- › **Small picture focus:** After being turned down for a job, Tim thinks, “I couldn’t get this job, why should I even look for another? I’ll just get passed up.” Tim has formed an opinion based on a single experience and uses it to predict the future.
- › **All or nothing thinking:** Lisa tends to think of things in extremes. She doesn’t consider anything less than perfect to be acceptable. For example, “If I don’t exercise each day, I may as well not bother.” She criticizes herself and others for not doing things as they “should” be done. She often feels stressed.
- › **Making a mountain out of a molehill:** Jill often views small issues as being much more significant than they actually are. For example, when a suggestion she made at work was not adopted, she lost confidence in her abilities. She even worried that she might lose her job. And she also does the reverse. When she does make a contribution, she thinks, “It’s nothing. Anyone could have done as well or better.”
- › **Playing the blame game:** Jeff is quick to blame himself even when he may not be responsible. When a coworker passed him without saying hello, he thinks, “She must be mad. What did I do?” Jim does the opposite – blaming others without considering his role in the issue or how he might solve it. He says things like, “How am I supposed to schedule a meeting when no one reads their emails!”
- › **Being a negative magnet:** Ryan got many positive comments in his yearly review and some constructive feedback. Afterwards he focused exclusively on the minor negative comments and ignored the rest of the review. He “snaps” to the negative rather than accurately balancing the feedback.
- › **Jumping to emotional conclusions:** Sue draws conclusions based on her emotions in the moment. For example, after feeling guilty for forgetting a friend’s birthday, she thinks of herself as a bad person.
- › **Living under a dark cloud:** Maggie is convinced that nothing will ever work out for her. Even small setbacks lead her to believe that she will never be happy. Despite what anyone says to the contrary, she holds onto the notion that there is no joy to be had. Gradually this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Do you recognize any of these patterns in the way you think about yourself, situations, or your future? You may not. Most thinking happens so quickly and so automatically that we don’t even realize what’s going on. The first step is to recognize negative thoughts. Only then can you fight against them.

# BUILDING BOUNCE

## Finding Your Resilience

As with muscle building, we can train to build up our resilience. The following exercises are simple, but done regularly, can help change how your brain responds to stress.

**Perspective:** Change the story...change your brain...change your response.

- › **What isn't a problem?** Take a daily timeout to stop and think of three things that are "right" in your world. Perhaps things that you might normally take for granted: your car started, the breeze was warm, or you don't have a headache. Try doing this during stressful times of the day, such as before a meeting or dinner prep.
- › **Gratitude out loud.** End each day by identifying three things that you're grateful for. Write them down in a running journal or find a gratitude buddy and text your list to one another. Try doing this for three weeks.
- › **Fill your credit card.** Take a piece of paper or create a digital page that you designate as your "Credit Card." Each day, list at least one thing that you have accomplished. In times of difficulty, just getting through the day counts as an accomplishment. Write it down and give yourself credit. Another approach is to look at the items you are grateful for (above) and write down the role you played in bringing them about.
- › **Make a win list.** Write down three examples of how resilience helped you survive and succeed in the past. Put it in your wallet or on your phone. Refer to it when you hear yourself saying, "I can't."

**Purpose:** What matters to me? How can I get there? What are my strengths that will help?

- › **Tell your life story in six words.** This playful, creative exercise, popularized by SMITH magazine ([www.smithmag.net](http://www.smithmag.net)), offers an opportunity to think about who you are and what matters. Try to sum up your life in exactly six words: Can't see finish line, still running. Loud and proud got me through. Didn't follow recipe, cake turned out.
- › **Find the gift.** In the context of a current stressor or difficulty, challenge yourself to find one thing that might be seen as an opportunity.
- › **Goals that work.** Goals help you get going, but you need to find a manageable starting point and then build slowly, but steadily toward success. Try using the following format:  
What can I control in this situation? (*Example: pending job loss – I can look for a new job.*)  
What change could I make in this area that I control to improve my situation? (*I can make sure I'm ready.*)  
What is the first, small step that I could do today? (*I can look at my resume and highlight areas to update.*)  
Continue setting small goals each day.



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**People:** I am not alone.

- › **Getting support.** Who makes up your safety net? List one person for each type of support. A person may be listed more than once.  
A person who can and will offer tangible support:  
A truth-teller:  
A good problem-solver:  
An empathetic listener:  
Someone who can help me see the humor and make me laugh:  
A cheerleader who offers inspiration:  
A person who loves and supports me unconditionally:
- › **Giving support.** Challenge yourself to become a giver. You could give someone a compliment each day. Bring a treat to work. Give your kids an hour or more of your time to use as they please. Explore volunteer opportunities or identify someone in your circle of friends and family that might benefit from your time, attention, or support. Choose an action, small or large, and start today.

**Plasticity** Connect with calm and practice to make permanent.

- › **Scientist vs. judge.** Practice observing vs. judging in everyday situation, such as waiting at a stoplight, or sitting at the dinner table. What do you see, smell, hear? Don't add a "story." Then push yourself to do the same thing when confronted with a stressor: take a breath, release judgment, and just notice what "is."
- › **Be here now.** When you notice stressful thoughts jumping around to the past and future, picture a comfortable chair. Imagine yourself sitting in it. Ask yourself, "Where am I?" Answer, "Here." Ask yourself, "When is it?" Answer, "Now." Notice that here and now you are okay.
- › **Explore mindfulness practices.** Recorded guided meditations offer an easy place to start. You can find examples from the [UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center](#)<sup>1</sup>. Can you make one or more of them a regular part of your day?

**Be well!**

Exercise regularly

Get enough sleep

Eat nutritious foods  
in the right amounts

Fill your spiritual tank



<sup>1</sup>Mindfulness Meditations created by Diana Winston for the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC). © 2021 The Regents of the University of California. All Rights Reserved.

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# MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

## Finding Your Resilience

Being mindful means bringing your focus to the present moment, not jumping to worries about the past or future. By practicing the simple act of bringing our minds back to the here and now, we can train our brains to not leap so quickly to anxious thoughts when we're stressed. We can gradually learn to be with and accept ourselves and situations without passing judgment. This can help us feel calmer and better able to manage difficulties.

Here is a short practice you can try. If possible, try to do this practice for about 10 minutes each day to begin calming your stress response.

- › Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed.
- › Sit in a comfortable position with your arms and legs uncrossed. Relax your body.
- › Close your eyes if comfortable doing so.
- › Bring your thoughts to what you are experiencing in this moment.
- › Notice the sensations of your body – your feet on the floor, the weight of your arms.
- › Now bring your focus to the natural in and out of your breathing.
- › Take a slow, deep breath. As you inhale, say the word “RELAX” to yourself.
- › As you exhale, say the word “CALM” to yourself.
- › Continue to breathe slowly and deeply.
- › Notice how the air moves in and out of your body and the sensations of your body as it does.
- › If your mind begins to wander. It's okay. Be kind to yourself. Give yourself credit for noticing. Then imagine your thoughts drifting away like clouds in the sky.
- › Gently return your focus to your breathing.
- › Continue this process for as long as you feel necessary.
- › When you feel relaxed, take a deep breath, exhale slowly, and open your eyes. Bring your thoughts back to your present environment.

You may also want to try a guided session:

**UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center**<sup>1</sup>: <http://marc.ucla.edu/mindful-meditations>



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