

Addressing Negative and Unhelpful Thoughts

Negative thoughts can present a big challenge to changing our diet and exercise routines. This handout helps you identify negative thoughts and shares strategies to help you address those negative beliefs related to diet and exercise.

Take 5 minutes to jot down any negative thoughts that you have about your health goals.

Example 1: "I'm never going to lose weight."

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

**Take your time with this activity.
We often don't realize the negative
thought chatter that is running
through our heads.**



Negative Feelings: How do you feel when you think this way?	
Sad, blue, depressed, down, unhappy	Embarrassed, foolish, humiliated, self-conscious
Anxious, worried, panicky, nervous, frightened	Hopeless, discouraged, pessimistic
Guilty, remorseful, bad, ashamed	Frustrated, stuck, disappointed, defeated
Inferior, worthless, inadequate, defective, incompetent	Angry, mad, resentful, annoyed, irritated, furious
Lonely, unloved, unwanted, rejected, alone, abandoned	Other (describe)

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Negative Thinking Traps

Research has found that our minds play tricks on us, causing us to exaggerate or irrationally believe things that are not actually true. Researchers have identified 10 ways this happens. Take a look at the list of negative thinking traps below. You will likely find that you have experienced many of these.

Negative Thinking Trap	Definition
1. All-or-Nothing Thinking	You think about things in absolute, black-and-white categories. You are either a success or a failure. Your performance was totally good or totally bad. If you are not perfect, then you are a failure. This binary approach does not account for shades of gray. Example: "I'm either totally on a diet and following it perfectly or I'm totally off, overeating and overdrinking, eating out at all meals."
2. Overgeneralization	You view a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. You draw faulty conclusions about something based on just one example. Example: "I didn't get to the gym 3x this week so I'll never be a person who exercises regularly."
3. Mental Filter	You focus and dwell on the negative aspects of a situation and filter out all of the positive ones. Example: You're only able to see the places you fell short or goals you missed. You are unable to see what you did well.
4. Discounting Positives	You insist your positive qualities and experiences don't count. Example: You only take ownership of negative outcomes (I gained weight this week) and not taking credit for positive outcomes (I meal planned and got up early to exercise)
5. Jumping to Conclusions	You jump to conclusions not warranted by the facts. There are two ways we do this: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mind-Reading: You assume what other people think. Commonly people inaccurately think others will react negatively to them.• Fortune Telling: You predict/assume things will turn out badly. Example: "I'll never lose weight. I'll never enjoy exercise. I'll always hate vegetables"
6. Magnification or Minimization	You blow negative things way out of proportion or shrink the importance of positive things. Example: "Seeing a 1/2 pound gain on the scale completely overshadows the fact that I have more energy, I'm sleeping better and I'm exercising consistently"
7. Emotional Reasoning	You reason from your feelings. For example: "I feel like a failure, so I'll never be able to make changes."
8. Should Statements	You criticize yourself or other people with "shoulds, shouldn'ts, musts, oughts and have-tos." <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-Directed Shoulds: Lead to feelings of guilt and inferiority.• Other-Directed Shoulds: Lead to feelings of bitterness, anger, and frustration. Example: "I shouldn't eat sugar" "I should be able to follow this perfectly" "I should exercise every single day even when I don't feel well"
9. Labeling	We take one characteristic of others or ourselves and globally apply it to the whole person. Rather than objectively considering the behavior, we engage in "labeling" the individual (and often ignore information that doesn't fit under the umbrella of the label). Example: "Because I didn't meet my goal for exercise, I am a failure"
10. Blame	You focus on finding fault instead of solving the problem. There are two ways we do this: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-Blame: You blame yourself for something you weren't entirely responsible for.• Other-Blame: You blame others and overlook ways you contributed to the problem. Example: "My husband keeps bringing chips into the house, and that's why I overate this week"

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Identify Negative Thinking Traps

Note the negative thinking traps that apply to the negative thoughts you wrote down above. See the example below, which matches with the negative belief "I'm never going to lose weight."

Negative and Unhelpful Thought Number	Definition
Example 1: I'm never going to lose weight.	All-or-Nothing Thinking, Overgeneralization, Mental Filter, Fortune Telling, Emotional Reasoning
1	
2	
3	
4	

Straightforward Technique

	YES/NO
Is the negative thought 100% true?	
Do I 100% believe the negative thought?	
Is this the only way to look at the situation?	

If you answered "NO" to any of the above questions...is there a more positive, realistic, or helpful perspective?

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Double Standard Technique:

Instead of putting yourself down, try talking to yourself in the same compassionate way you might talk to a dear friend who was upset. Ask yourself: "Would I say such harsh things to a friend with a similar problem? If no, why not? What would I say to him or her?"

Name of a Close Friend/Family Member/Child: _____

Would you say your negative/unhelpful thought to them if they were in a similar situation?

YES [] NO []

If no, why not?

What I would actually say to them:

Summary: 3 Steps to Addressing Negative and Unhelpful Thoughts

1. Identify the Negative Thinking Trap.
2. Try the Straightforward Technique: Consider if there is a more positive, realistic, or helpful perspective.
3. Try the Double Standard Technique: Ask yourself if you would say the negative or unhelpful thought to a friend or family member. If no, why not and what would you say to them instead? Begin speaking to yourself in the same compassionate way you would speak to someone you care about.