

6 Steps to a Happier Life

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Six Steps to a Healthier, Happier Life (David Burns, M.D.):

(1) Identify the upsetting event (on a sheet of paper or in a journal)

When you notice yourself getting into a negative mood, stop and record the situation that made you feel this way (e.g., getting a low midterm grade, getting rejected by a date, etc.).

(2) Record your negative feelings

Now specify your emotions in detail: What feelings are you having? (sad, anxious, angry, etc.) Rate each feeling on a 0-100% scale. What is going on in your body? (notice tension anywhere, heart rate, breathing, sweating, etc.)

(3) Record your automatic thoughts

Stop and ask yourself: What was going through my mind when my mood shifted? What was I thinking about myself, others, or my future? (e.g., "I am a failure," "Nobody likes me", etc.)

This is the step that requires the most practice...Almost every time you feel a bad mood coming on, there is an automatic thought (usually a negative thought about yourself) that preceded the mood. Identified these thoughts is the first step toward evaluating and changing them.

Once you have the automatic thoughts down, it is time to ask yourself: ARE THESE THOUGHTS 100% TRUE? You can find this out by being *scientific* about your own life – in other words, by looking for errors in your thinking, gathering evidence, and testing things out...

(4) Identify any cognitive distortions

OUR THOUGHTS ARE NOT ALWAYS 100% TRUE, because we tend to make common errors in our thinking called "cognitive distortions." Here a few of the most popular cognitive distortions that people make – see if you can identify any of these in the thoughts you wrote down:

Catastrophizing – we often predict the worst case scenario and expect disaster. It is so easy for us to make ourselves nervous over "what ifs," making a mountain out of a molehill. The airplane Far Side comic above is an excellent example of catastrophizing.

All-or-none thinking – we commonly think in "black and white" terms, without considering a more balanced or middle-of-the-road type of view. For example, we might think "If I don't get an A in this class, I'm a failure." In reality, there is an "in between," a middle ground (i.e., getting a B or a C).

What makes you unhappy? Why does your mood sometimes shift from good to bad "all of a sudden"? It might be because something terrible has happened. Or it might be because you *think* something terrible has happened. Today's column will teach you how to distinguish these two possibilities in six basic steps, using a fancy psychological technique called "cognitive restructuring," which is an effective way of changing your thinking patterns. But why would you want to change the way you think? Because your thoughts are not always 100% accurate!

We all have "automatic thoughts" – distorted negative views of ourselves, others, or our future – that can pop into our heads spontaneously, without us even being aware of them! These automatic thoughts can be dangerous, because they can affect our mood and, in some cases, they can cause depression and anxiety disorders. The bottom line is that OUR THOUGHTS AFFECT OUR FEELINGS! Here are six steps you can

Personalization – we tend to think everything is about us, even when it's not. For instance, when someone acts unfriendly toward us, we assume we must have done something wrong. Furthermore, we often compare ourselves to others, trying to determine who is smarter, better looking, etc. The Dalai Lama's advice: Don't take things personally!

Selective abstraction – We tend to magnify the negative details of a situation while filtering out all the positives. It is common to have "mailboxes" for negative opinions of ourselves, so when someone insults us, we receive the message very clearly. We are not always able to receive our "positive mail", however, because we discount the compliments and good things that happen to us regularly. Here's an exercise to try out: Create a new "mailbox" for yourself (e.g., "I'm fun to be around") and collect mail for that new address this week, looking for evidence that you are indeed a fun person.

SO IF THERE ARE MISTAKES IN OUR THINKING AND THESE MISTAKES CAN LEAD TO NEGATIVE EMOTIONS, HOW CAN WE CHANGE THESE FAULTY THOUGHTS?

(5) Compose a rational response

Now here's where you become a "personal scientist": Ask yourself the following questions about each of your automatic thoughts:

- What is the evidence that the thought is true?
- What is the evidence that the thought is NOT true?
- What's the worst that can happen even if it is true? Can I live with that?
- What's the most likely outcome?
- Are there any strengths or positives in me or the situation that I am ignoring?
- What would I tell a friend if they were having that same thought?
- Is there another way of looking at the situation?

Using the answer to these questions, try to formulate a more balanced response to each of your automatic thoughts (e.g., "I'm not stupid – I just got one low grade on a hard test").

(6) Outcome – What are your feelings now?

Based on your rational response, how do you feel about the situation now? Rate each feeling on a 0-100% scale. Are your feelings different or less negative than before?

TIP: Try these steps at least once a day for a month, in writing, especially when you notice your mood shifting to an unpleasant one. See what happens...Many research studies have shown that you will most likely feel better about yourself and your life!