

"I'm athletic."  
 "I'm smart and empathetic."  
 "I have wonderful friends."  
 "My body does amazing things."  
 "This too shall pass."  
 "I have many job skills."  
 "There are many opportunities for me."  
 "I have unique skill sets."  
 "I'm a hard worker."  
 "I can't affect the past."  
 "This is going to be a great day."  
 "I'm doing my best."  
 "I'm a kind person."  
 "I love myself."  
 "I'm in control of my thoughts."  
 "There is so much good in the world."

"\_\_\_\_\_ is my superpower."

# FLIP ... YOUR SCRIPT

Those negative thoughts in your head are distorting the truth.  
Here's how to set them straight.

BY JANET LEE

"I SHOULD'VE DONE BETTER." "I'M NOT SMART/PRETTY/THIN/sophisticated/sexy enough." "I stuck my foot in my mouth." "Nobody's going to hire me." These are just a few examples of the thousands of thoughts that often go through our heads day after day, unmonitored, uncensored and unwanted. Maybe it's not these exactly, but it's likely some version of them. "I think the brain skews negative because we're problem-solvers on an innate level in terms of survival," says marriage and family therapist Emily Simonian, LMFT, who is the head of clinical learning for Thriveworks, which offers affordable counseling and psychiatry services nationwide, both online and in person. "We want to get ahead of things so we pull up anything we need to fix. Our brains will focus on the negative because that needs more attention. It wants to tackle these problems, even if they aren't real." Essentially, it's trying to be a helper when you really don't need that kind of help.

"Most of the time, these thoughts are unconscious," says Annie Allen, LTC, a certified life transition coach. "We're just not aware of how sabotaging we are in our thought patterns. When we do become aware, the idea of trying to

change them might feel uncomfortable or unmanageable because you can't imagine it being any different."

But here's the revelation. These things your supercapable, powerful, helping, anticipating brain is telling you aren't based on facts; they're not true. They're simply thoughts, chemical actions generated by neurons and synapses inside the brain. "Your thoughts are as fluid and fleeting as your emotions," says Simonian. "Sometimes we have to let the negative, intrusive or challenging thoughts pass through, without tugging at the strings and giving them too much attention."

#### ● AN ALTERED REALITY

"Cognitive distortion" is the term experts use to describe these negative thoughts that twist reality. The following are some of the most common:

**Catastrophizing** Just like it sounds, catastrophizing is thinking the worst is going to happen. "You're creating a scenario in your head that is highly unlikely to occur," says Allen. You get a big credit card bill and think: "I'm going to go broke." You break up with your partner and

think: “I’ll never find love.” A 2019 study published in *The Bone & Joint Journal* found that pain catastrophizing was associated with poorer outcomes in people who had hip pain. Researchers pointed out that treating those thought patterns was key to treating the hip pain in general.

**Ruminating** “This is what most people refer to as overthinking,” says Allen. You keep going over and over a situation in your head, like asking for a raise at work or telling your parents you’re going to move overseas. Every time you go over the difficult thoughts, your body responds.

Rumination is strongly associated with depression, according to a 2019 analysis of research published in the journal *Neuroimage*. Researchers tied this type of thinking to an area of the brain called the default mode network, which is a group of brain regions that tends to be active when we’re focused internally.

**All-or-Nothing Thinking** “This is also called black-or-white thinking,” says Allen. You characterize things at one extreme or the other and if you believe an experience will be horrible, like buying a fixer-upper or adopting a pet, you may just avoid it. “But so much of life is in the grays,” she says. “If you had a more realistic thought process about it, it might be hard, it might suck, but it will get easier each day, it will be OK.” And you might get wonderful experience and memories out of it that will help you in the future.

**Labeling** Thinking of yourself or others in simple negative terms—lazy, ignorant, rude, helpless—keeps you from seeing a full picture about a person, says Simonian. These limiting thoughts can keep you isolated from others and prevent you from pushing yourself and making connections.

**Mind Reading** How many times have you played out a conversation in your head about what someone else is probably thinking? You have entire conversations with them in your head, yet you don’t actually know what they’re thinking because you can’t. You feel all the emotions of that negative conversation, without even knowing it’s warranted.

#### ● GET QUIET

The first step in altering negative self-talk is becoming aware of it. In order to be aware you have to get quiet. “Very few people dedicate any part of their day to these practices, but if you don’t exercise awareness on a daily basis, you’re not going to see the results,” says Allen.

**1 JOURNALING** There are many different methods of journaling, but the practice “allows us to tap into the brain chatter and understand it better,” says Allen. You can just write down whatever is in your head (known as the “brain dump” method) or, as Allen prefers, be more

intentional and write down what’s worrying you. “It helps me reframe the negative things. If I can write them all down, it feels less chaotic, just like doing your grocery list.”

Going back and looking at what you wrote can help you notice patterns in your thinking, says Simonian. “You might notice that you’re always saying this or using that word or feeling a certain way.”

**2 GROUNDING EXERCISES** When your brain is jumping around so much from thought to thought or caught up in negativity, it’s hard to get it to focus, and that’s where grounding exercises come in. Breath work and exercise are two simple ways to anchor yourself. There are many other practices as well that can help you direct your senses to one thing in the present moment.

**3 MEDITATION AND MINDFULNESS** These techniques are all about being in the present moment and observing. When that happens, you can’t get caught up in the chatter. (Prayer is a type of mindfulness that many people find helpful as well.) So much of the negative thinking running through our minds is related to what happened in the past, which we can no longer impact, or might happen in future, which hasn’t even occurred yet. Being in the present moment is an easy-to-find refuge from all those worries and regrets.

#### ● CHANGE YOUR THOUGHTS

Once you see what’s happening through awareness, then you can try to write a new script by reframing your thoughts. When you become aware that you’re having them, stop and try these techniques.

**1 COGNITIVE CHALLENGING** The constant flow of worry and negativity—especially when it’s not based in reality—is a form of mental torture that serves no purpose except to make you miserable. “Cognitive challenging is the absolute king of cognitive techniques,” says Simonian. “It’s challenging your negative thoughts directly. You ask yourself, ‘Do I have evidence that this is true or am I making this stuff up?’” Do you know your partner is cheating? Is your bank account really empty? Do you absolutely know your boss is going to fire you? Challenging the thought helps it dissipate.

**2 COGNITIVE REAPPRAISAL** “I use this to help people see the benefits of something that’s happening,” says Simonian. “If someone is feeling guilty, I help them understand that they’re feeling guilty because they care. And then you follow it with some positive self-talk.” She gives the example of feeling guilty about taking personal time off (PTO) from work. “People are viewing PTO as a loss versus a win. They think they’re missing

out or falling behind versus resting and recovering so they can come back rejuvenated,” explains Simonian. “I help them understand that they feel guilty because they care about their work or they take so much pride in their job and that’s a good thing.” From there they can understand that taking time off will help them be even better at their job.

**3 POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS** Surprisingly, sometimes it’s hard to find the positive words to substitute for the negative. Having positive affirmations at the ready can help that, says Allen. “You can write down positive thoughts on 3- by 5-inch cards and put them in places where you know you’ll find them, or you can go on the internet and search for positive affirmations,”

she says. “You’ll find all sorts of quotes and images, and you can make these your screen saver on your phone or computer so you see them all day long. Just change them out frequently.”

“The important thing is that when you become more aware of your thoughts, you begin to understand that there’s a connection between the feelings you’re having and the thoughts playing in your mind,” says Allen. “Both affect how you behave and that affects the results you see in your life. If you don’t like a result you’re seeing in your life, relationship or job, you have the power to change it. The way you do it is by rewriting the scripts playing in your head. Watch how those new thoughts over time will change your feelings about things, which will change your actions, which will change the results.”

## THE TRICKLE-DOWN THEORY

Everyone has negative thoughts, and if you don’t take steps to increase your awareness and change your thinking, it’s possible to get into the habit of entertaining them on a daily or hourly basis. Besides making you miserable, that creates stress and sets you up for all sorts of related

issues, including insomnia, increased inflammation, depression and anxiety. Those in turn increase your risk for things like chronic pain and metabolic and cardiovascular disease. According to a 2021 study published in the *Journal of Neuroscience*, that day-after-day pattern of ruminating,

catastrophizing, labeling, black-and-white thinking and more may make structures in your brain, such as the amygdala, an area responsible for emotional responses in life, more sensitive, putting them on high alert. That signals the rest of the body to be at Code Red as well. And because the

brain is so good at trying to learn things and make responses second nature, that road between, “I’m never going to get a leg up in the world,” and the adrenal glands releasing the stress hormone cortisol, gets shorter and shorter. All the more reason to start talking nicer to yourself.

