

Thinking Patterns & Mental Wellness

The way that we think about our lives and experiences have a significant impact on how we feel and the choices we make. Paying attention to our thoughts can help us to minimize patterns of negative thinking and increase our positive self-talk to promote overall well-being.

Thoughts, Emotions, and Behaviors

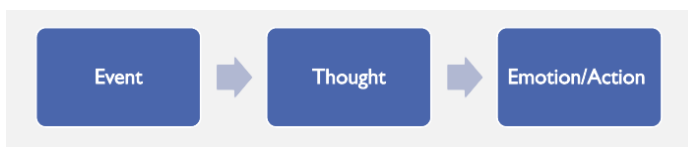
As humans, the way that we perceive and interpret our life experiences has a significant impact on our emotions and behaviors. Many people believe that the events or situations that we experience in our lives lead directly to an emotion; however, it is our thoughts, or the way in which we interpret the experience, that will lead to specific emotions and related behaviors.

For example, consider two college students who both get a “D” grade on an exam. Both students had hoped for a better grade, but still have the opportunity to pass the course with hard work going forward.

The first student receives their grade and thinks, “I’m such a failure. I don’t even know why I am in college. I should just drop out now before I fail every class”. As a result of this thought process, this student likely feels depressed, unmotivated, and hopeless. This student stops attending class and eventually withdraws.

The second student receives their grade and thinks, “I am disappointed, but I know I can do better. I still have the opportunity to pass this class. If I work hard I know I can pass the next exam”. This student likely feels focused and motivated. They work hard to create a new study plan and schedule an appointment with a tutor for support.

This example demonstrates how an event (getting a “D” grade on an exam) does not directly cause a specific emotion. Rather, the thought process following the event leads to an emotion, which then leads to a behavioral response.



Promoting Awareness

Because the way we think impacts the way that we feel and the decisions we make, a meaningful way to promote overall mental wellness is to change specific ways of thinking that keep us feeling negative emotions or making less than ideal decisions. We can do this by becoming aware of our automatic negative thoughts and common negative thinking patterns.

Automatic Negative Thoughts

An automatic negative thought is a type of thought that is often experienced so quickly that you might not even be aware of it. These types of thoughts negatively impact how we feel or the choices we make.

Negative Thinking Patterns

Negative thinking patterns are a repeated, unhealthy way of thinking about a difficult event or situation. Thinking in specific patterns is a learned habit, like tying your shoes. An awareness of common negative thinking patterns will help you to stop and challenge your thinking. Review the list below and consider which negative thinking patterns are familiar to you. Many people have more than one negative thinking pattern that they experience often.

- **All or Nothing Thinking.** Thoughts related to seeing things in black-and-white or all-or-nothing categories. These thoughts often include the words always, never, all, or none.
- **Filtering Out the Positive.** Focusing in on one thing that went wrong and filtering out all of the positive events that occurred.
- **Overgeneralization.** Seeing negative situations as never-ending and as a “forever” pattern.
- **Jumping to Conclusions.** Making a negative interpretation right away even though you don’t have all of the facts.
- **Catastrophizing.** Negatively exaggerating the important and future impact of a negative event or situation.
- **Emotional Reasoning.** Assuming that your negative emotions reflect the way that things really are. For example, you feel worried so you believe something must be wrong.
- **Should Statements.** Trying to motivate yourself by using words like “should” or “shouldn’t” or shaming yourself for things in the past by thinking “I should have...” or “I shouldn’t have...”.
- **Personalization.** Viewing yourself as the cause of a negative event for which you were not entirely responsible.

Changing Our Thinking

Changing the way we think takes practice and patience. For many of us, our thinking patterns are so ingrained that it will take time for us to change these habits. However, over time, our brains have the ability to develop new connections that will make it easier to default to a more positive or constructive way of thinking.

1. **Pay attention to emotions.** The first step in the process is increasing awareness of our emotions. If you feel like you have a limited emotional vocabulary, consider searching online for an “emotions wheel”. Having a diverse vocabulary for defining how you feel is helpful to the process and assessing change.
2. **Use emotions as a place to start.** When you notice a negative emotion come up, use this as an opportunity to examine your thinking patterns. First, define the emotion you are experiencing. Second, identify the activating event (what happened prior to this emotion occurring). Third, reflect on the thoughts running through your mind. If you are having a hard time identifying your thoughts, try to slow down and ask yourself how you are interpreting the event or how you would explain the event. Create a list to document this information. An example is provided below.
 - *Emotion:* angry, annoyed, hurt
 - *Activating Event:* You sent your friend a text asking if they wanted to get together this week and they never responded.
 - *Thoughts:* “They clearly are ignoring me and don’t want to friends anymore”; “This always happens to me! I must not be a fun person to spend time with. I’ll never be able to make real friends.”
3. **Assess the thoughts.** Consider the thoughts that you wrote down. Are these thoughts leading to negative emotions or behaviors? How are these thoughts directly linked to the emotions you identified? Do you recognize any common negative thinking patterns?
4. **Challenge the negative thoughts.** Ask yourself the following questions for each negative thought you identified and write down your responses.
 - Is this thought really true?
 - Is there evidence to support this thought?
 - Is there a more realistic, constructive, or positive way to view this situation?
 - Is thinking this way helping or harming me?
5. **Replace the thought.** Replace the negative thought with a more realistic, constructive, or positive thought in its place. Using the example from above related to not receiving a text response from a friend, a replacement thought could be, “I can’t read my friend’s mind.

It’s possible that they didn’t see my message or got distracted before responding. I will have to follow up or wait to hear from them to know for certain”.

6. **Identify the new emotion.** After challenging the negative thought and replacing it with a more positive, constructive, or realistic thought, take a moment to identify how you are feeling. The goal of this process isn’t necessarily to experience an immediate drastic change in emotions (for example, going from sad to overjoyed), rather to shift your emotional state to a more centered, positive, or neutral position (for example, going from sad to calm or content). This more positive or neutral emotional state is helpful to reflecting on the overall process of changing the way we think.

Positive Self-Talk

Positive self-talk is a term used to describe positive or constructive thoughts that we use to help ourselves navigate difficult experiences or challenges. For example, the student who thinks, “I have worked really hard and will do my best today” before taking an exam is using positive self-talk to promote motivation and reduce anxiety.

Using positive self-talk and a solution-focused mindset can help promote overall resilience. When dealing with difficulty, ask yourself the following questions.

- What can I learn from this?
- What could I have done differently?
- Who might be able to help or support me with this?
- Which of my strengths will be most helpful?
- What can I do next?

Counseling Services

Counseling services are available to support Anoka Technical College students. A counselor can talk with you about any concerns or difficulties you are facing, provide support, and help in developing strategies and skills to promote wellness and goal achievement. Counseling services are confidential and free. You are encouraged to reach out for support.

To learn more about counseling services, visit: <https://www.anokatech.edu/student-services/counseling-services/>

To schedule an appointment with a counselor, visit the weblink above or call 763-576-7860.