

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome¹

Dealing with negative thinking

What is negative thinking?

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome is a very confusing condition. There are a lot of conflicting views as to what is going on and what makes it better or worse. Sufferers often feel that they have no control over the situation. Any attempt to change things, to do more for example, may lead to an increase in symptoms, which the sufferer may believe means that they are doing themselves permanent damage. Feelings of hopelessness are common and these feelings then make it much harder for the sufferer to keep up the strategies that will eventually lead to improvement. Negative thinking can lead to feelings of hopelessness and slow down recovery. This leaflet outlines ways you can identify and begin to change negative thinking.

Have you noticed differences in the way people think about things? The example below shows how negative and positive thoughts lead to different reactions to the same situation. Can you relate to this example?

It is an ordinary day. There are some things to be done - some house work, a visit from a friend, a meal to be cooked and a form to be filled in...

Person A

I'll do the washing up this morning. At least it's a start. The kitchen will look better. Even if I'm not my usual self, it might cheer me up to see my friend. I could cook something simple. I quite enjoy cooking once I get into it. I'll make a start on the form and spend about an hour on it this evening, then I'll watch some telly.

Makes a start, has some social contact, feels a bit more on top of things, feels encouraged

Person B

The whole house needs doing. I can't cope with housework. I have no energy at all. I can't see anyone today. I feel too miserable. She won't like me now anyway. I'm so boring. Why bother cooking? It's only for me anyway. This form is too difficult. I can't do it.

Doesn't attempt anything, sees no-one, feels hopeless and demoralised.

Learning to recognise unrealistic, negative thoughts and to balance them with more realistic, positive ones can be very helpful. However, changing your way of thinking is quite difficult at first and you will need to keep working at it. It may help to enlist the help of someone you trust.

Identifying negative thinking

Negative thoughts can be difficult to spot because they become a habit, they can flash quickly into your mind and most of us are not used to noticing our thoughts. Learning to spot and catch these negative thoughts is a skill you can master with time.

Negative thoughts are common in Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and lead to feelings of hopelessness, despair, frustration, anger and guilt. Here are some common examples. Try to spot the ones which apply to you. Mark them in the box.

- I will never get better. There is no hope.
- Walking only made my legs feel worse. Maybe I shouldn't walk any more.
- My system must be permanently damaged. There is nothing that can be done.

- I feel really useless. I can't cope with anything.
- My life is a mess. I can't do anything about it.
- I'm just a failure. Why bother trying anything?
- I should be able to do more than this. I can't even walk to the shops anymore.
- I should be able to read more than a page. I can't concentrate on anything any more.
- No one understands my condition. No one gives me the kind of care I need.
- People have seemed off with me recently. No one likes me.
- Life is unfair. Things shouldn't be like this.
- I must have done something terribly wrong to feel like this. I probably deserve it.

When you feel low and hopeless, you tend to think in particular ways that are distorted in a negative way. These are called 'thinking errors'. Try to spot the patterns of thinking that apply to you. Mark them in the box.

- All or nothing thinking* — if something is not 100% right, then it is a disaster, eg 'All I managed to do was the washing up which is useless. The house is a complete and utter tip.'
- Thinking that everything is going wrong when only one thing has gone wrong (over generalising)*, eg You found a walk difficult once and think 'Walking will always be difficult. I can't do it.'
- Ignoring the positive and only seeing the negative*, eg 'I had a terrible day' when the day included both disappointments and a success.
- 'Should thinking'* — feeling frustrated about what you haven't been able to do but should have, rather than feeling pleased about what you have actually been able to do. eg "I should have been able to walk further" .
- Thinking the worst (catastrophising)*, eg you feel a bit more tired. You assume that there has been irreversible damage to your system and permanent disability.
- Emotional reasoning* — because something feels true, you assume it is true, eg because you feel a failure, you decide you are a failure.

Changing negative thinking

If you have been thinking in a negative way for sometime now, it will take a lot of practice to change these ways. You may find it quite difficult at first and this may trigger more negative thoughts, such as "I'm useless. I can't do anything right". You may need help from a friend or from your health worker. Give yourself time. **Remember you can learn to think more positively and this will make a big difference in your life.**

Here are some suggestions:

First, write down your negative thoughts as soon as possible. If it's difficult to notice any thoughts, try noticing when you feel down and ask "what went through my mind just before I started feeling hopeless or frustrated or angry"

Second, ask yourself , 'Is what I believe TRUE?'

- Look for any evidence against the belief. Imagine the belief is on trial and you are collecting all the evidence you can against it.
- It will be useful to consult someone outside the situation for their opinion
- Ask yourself if everyone would have the same belief in this situation. If you are being hard on yourself try the 'best friend technique': what would you say if you were your own best friend?
- Ask yourself if you could be making a mistake in the way you are thinking
- Are there any other ways of looking at the situation?
- If you had thought differently about the situation, would that have changed the way you handled things?

Third, balance each negative/unreasonable thought with more realistic ones

- These should be different to the unreasonable belief
- Try and come up with realistic statements

- Try to think of as many counter examples as possible

Now, read the following example and work out your own examples using the same format. You can do this with the help of your friend, doctor and/or your counsellor.

SITUATION: Another day ahead and have very little energy

Unreasonable/negative thoughts:

- The whole house needs cleaning. I can't possible do it.
- Last time I cooked, I made a mess of the custard. I can't cook any more.
- My life is a mess. It will never get better.
- I should be able to do the Spring cleaning
- I feel weak and my legs ache. My system has been permanently destroyed.
- I am a failure

Resulting feelings: Hopelessness, depression.

Now lets look at the same situation from a different angle:

Reasonable/positive thoughts:

- Making the living room tidy is good enough for today. I can do that and feel proud of it.
- I've managed to cook on other days. I'll make a simple meal this time.
- There are some good things in my life. I still enjoy reading and I have some very loyal friends.
- I can do some housework. Doing the spring cleaning in my current state is an unrealistic expectation, which I do not have to meet.
- There is no permanent damage to my system. The aching and tiredness will get better if I gradually increase what I do.
- I am not a failure, I have achieved many good things in the past. I can achieve some smaller good things today.

Resulting feelings: Still tired, but also enthusiasm and hope.

Now you can work through your own examples. Write down a situation that has made you miserable and any negative thoughts you may have had and the resulting feelings. Next, opposite each negative thought, write down a more balanced thought and any new feelings. You will find that after practising this technique for a while, you get much better at balancing your thoughts.

Remember it will take time to change the way you think and feel

Finally

- ➔ Doing the exercises when you feel tired is difficult
- ➔ It might be useful to work through them with a trusted friend or family member.
- ➔ If you need extra help you can always talk to your doctor and/or your counsellor.

Like everything else, do a little often — maybe five minutes a day at first.

¹ Adapted, in part, with permission, from material in the patient management package by Mary Burgess, Dr Trudy Chalder, Dr Alicia Deale, Vincent Deary and Professor Simon Wessley, CFS Research Unit, GKT School of Medicine, London

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