

Go over to THE BRIGHT SIDE

January can make everybody feel low. But introducing positive and practical changes to your way of thinking can lift your spirits, say *Dr Jessamy Hibberd* and *Jo Usmar*

ILLUSTRATIONS
Peskimo

THINKING IS AUTOMATIC. A bit like breathing, you just think. Even when you're asleep, your mind is churning away. When you go to bed you don't talk yourself through every little detail – 'I'm going to pull down the covers and lift my left foot up...'. Our brain chooses what is important to think about and what's not. This is integral to our being able to function properly because if we had to think about every single thing we did each day, steam would come out of our ears.

This system works well until your brain switches on to negative autopilot. When you feel low your thoughts tend to become depressing. You ignore important facts that would make you feel better and give you a more helpful, realistic view of what's happening. This means you continue to feel low, or feel even worse. You get so used to focusing on the bad stuff you don't even realise that's what you are doing. Negative thinking has become a bad habit. You don't even realise you're punishing yourself because you have lost the ability to consciously register your thoughts.

Negative automatic thoughts (NATs) such as 'Wow, she's much more successful than me' or 'He hates me' whiz round your head without you even being aware of them and cloud what's important. They lead to misinterpretations of situations and encourage your mind to block out any evidence that doesn't adhere to your gloomy view.

When you feel low you have to proactively retune your brain by paying more attention to the good things until that too becomes a habit. It may sound obvious but negative thoughts aren't facts. Unless you have incontrovertible proof to support your theory it remains just that – a theory. When you next find yourself generalising and undermining your abilities because something less than good has happened, catch the thoughts, acknowledge them and then challenge them – are they true? Force yourself to counteract negative thoughts by picking out a time when something great did happen. And ask yourself, 'Will this matter tomorrow, in a week, next year?' If not, who cares? Let it go.

HOW TO TURN AROUND YOUR NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

MONOCHROME

Everything is clear cut – black and white.

If your performance falls short of perfect, you're a failure. You set yourself ridiculous goals that are all impossible to achieve so that you can punish yourself. That £3,000 pay rise? Should have been £5,000. The four-minute mile? Should have been three.

GOLDEN RULE Allow yourself to see the middle ground between good and bad or perfect and failure. Set yourself a realistic goal and promise yourself that if you achieve it you'll give yourself a pat on the back. Then do it.

OVER-GENERALISATION

You see a single negative event as a never-ending

Thought patterns are characterised by the words 'never', 'always'. Didn't get that promotion? That's because you get promoted. That man you liked who fancied you? That's because men always fancy your friend.

GOLDEN RULE Change 'never' and 'always' to 'no time' or 'sometimes'.

TELEPATHIC TRICKERY

A raised eyebrow doesn't necessarily mean that someone is plotting your immediate downfall.

You're second-guessing something that hasn't happened and your analysis will be coloured by however you're at the time.

GOLDEN RULE No one can read minds so don't try second-guess what others are thinking, especially if you're feeling down. If you really wish to know that better to ask outright what the person is thinking.



SAVOUR FAILURE

Something dreadful has happened and you replay it over and over again in your mind.

You're obsessed with it. You get a weird sense of satisfaction in making yourself relive the pain of the event hourly. You don't believe you deserve to feel OK. You can't see how you will ever feel OK again.

GOLDEN RULE Be proactive about moving on. So it was bad, but was it really the end of the world? And if yes, it was indeed the end of the world, then start to work out how you can get over it or learn from it. You can choose to either ruminate or reflect. Rumination means dwelling on something you cannot change, while reflection means using what you now know to move on.

WHY ALWAYS ME?

You believe negative events result from your own character flaws and you take responsibility for things that have nothing to do with you.

Basically everything is about you. You are the centre of the sad universe, but because you are being pessimistic and self-defamatory you don't recognise it as egotistical and self-involved. Self-obsession can be as much part of the 'I'm worthless' mode of thinking as the 'I'm fabulous' thoughts. For example, if something breaks you think, 'I'm so clumsy,' rather than, 'It was an accident, what a shame.' **GOLDEN RULE** Remember, it's not all about you. Next time you think something negative, try not to personalise it – take out the 'me' aspect and look at it in a wider context.

CATASTROPHISING

You attribute extreme and horrible consequences to the outcome of events, making them seem unmanageable or interminable.

'If I see her at that party, I'll end up crying and ruining it for everyone. Best I just don't go.' The world isn't going to self-combust if you mess up occasionally.

GOLDEN RULE Scrap the 'what ifs' altogether: You're worrying about something that hasn't happened yet and probably never will. Ask yourself, 'What, realistically, is

POSITIVITY

You reject a positive experience by insisting that it doesn't count.

After moaning for weeks that your boss doesn't appreciate you, she sends a round-robin email to the whole company thanking you for all your hard work. You translate that into: she must have heard you'd been whining about her and this is her subtle revenge to let you know she is on to you.

GOLDEN RULE Accept that good things do happen and when they're the result of your actions give yourself some credit. Rewarding yourself for your achievements is motivational and will drive you to succeed.

NIT-PICKING

You select a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively, thus losing any perspective on the event as a whole.

It's like finding a tiny hairline crack in your favourite mug and suddenly hating the entire kitchen.

GOLDEN RULE You need to put things into perspective. If 99 per cent of something was great then give 99 per cent of your attention to the great things and one per cent to the rest.

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◀ the worst that might happen?' and then, 'If the worst does happen, can I cope with it?' Have faith in what you can deal with and manage.

SHOULDA, WOULD'A, COULDA

You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn't's, as if you need to be whipped or punished.

'I should have smiled when I saw the boss. Now he'll think I'm miserable or a gormless idiot.'

GOLDEN RULE Change the word 'should' to the much more life-affirming 'would/will' or 'could/can' so the thought becomes 'it would have been good to smile. I will do it next time.'

THE FORTUNE TELLER'S ERROR

You anticipate that things will turn out badly and behave as though this is an established fact.

This might make people think you're endearingly self-deprecating for a couple of days, but after a while it just seems self-indulgent. Assuming the worst will happen becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as you behave in negative ways. Be careful: if you keep saying, 'I'm not good enough for that,' other people will start believing it, too.

GOLDEN RULE Scrap the self-bullying, because you can't win: if you do well you disregard it, whereas if you do badly

you won't feel better by being proved right. Behaving positively will encourage positive results.

I'M SAD THEREFORE EVERYTHING IS SAD

You assume that your negative emotions reflect the way things really are.

You'll pass on your bad mood like a particularly virulent strain of flu. 'Isn't it a hideous day? Wasn't that meeting mind-numbing?'

GOLDEN RULE Just because you feel rubbish it doesn't mean rubbish things are going to happen. Don't use your feelings as a guide for how things will turn out; instead use the theory of 'opposite action' – doing the things you least want to. Depression wants you to stay in and feel useless. Disobey it and do the very things that seem frightening or too much effort – seeing your friends, going to work. You'll feel better on so many levels.

THE REVERSE BINOCULARS

You exaggerate the importance of your mistakes while playing down the importance of your accomplishments.

It's a sign of maturity to be able to accept a compliment. Remember that by belittling your achievements you are indirectly belittling other people's achievements. If you are rubbish even though you won that award, what does that say about the people who didn't win?

GOLDEN RULE Acknowledge that you've got to where you are today because of your achievements, not your mistakes. ■



HOW TO SPOT SYMPTOMS OF LOW MOOD

- Restlessness, impatience, frustration, feeling irritable
- Feeling angry, nervous
- Feeling self-focused; world's out to get me
- Fearing the worst
- Inability to concentrate and boredom
- Disliking yourself; doubting your ability
- Feeling frightened, anxious or guilty
- Physical symptoms such as aches and pain, tension in the neck and shoulders
- Exhaustion, sleep problems
- Being overly clumsy or fidgety
- Increased drinking, over- or under-eating
- Avoiding people or snapping at them
- Being forgetful or constantly seeking reassurance.

