



How to Become Aware of Your Automatic Thoughts

The aim in cognitive therapy is to reduce the effect of your negative thoughts on how you feel. The first step is to recognise these thoughts.

What are negative automatic thoughts (NATs)? Negative automatic thoughts are:

1. *Negative*: they make you feel even worse about yourself (e.g., I'm useless) and your life (e.g. It's all hopeless). They also stop you from helping yourself (e.g., There's no point).
2. *Automatic*: they just pop up into your mind, you don't decide to think them. In fact, you may find it hard not to think them, as they are like a habit.
3. *Believable*: they seem to be right: they seem to be facts and you will tend to accept them.
4. *Biased*: although they seem right, they are likely to be distorted or inaccurate. They may have some support from how you feel or things that have happened but ignore many other facts which do not fit such a negative view.

How to catch NATs. This will be quite hard at first. They may have become a habit, or you may think that they are not thoughts but reality. To learn to catch these thoughts:

1. *Use your feelings* as a cue. Whenever you notice feeling upset or your mood takes a downturn, ask yourself "What was going through my mind just then?"
2. Look out for *pictures* as well as words. Sometimes the NATs take the form of pictures or images in your mind's eye. It is important to watch out for these images.
3. If you seem to be upset by an *event* rather than a thought, ask "How did I view this situation?" or "What did this mean to me?"

Counting NATs: With breaking any habit, catching yourself at it is the first hurdle. Counting the thoughts is one way of doing this. At first, "tuning in" to the negative things you are saying to yourself can make you feel bad. However, you will soon find that you are more able to *stand back* from them. Try to catch and observe them as they come to mind. You might try putting *ticks* on a piece of paper or card or counting then using a golf or knitting *counter*. Then you can see easily how many you had that day. At first, the daily tally will go up as you get better at catching them.

Beware: There are a few *reasons or excuses* for not catching or writing down your thoughts. It may seem like a lot of *effort* when you are already finding it hard to cope. You may worry that writing the thoughts will only make you *feel worse*. You may think that it is *stupid* having such thoughts. Although identifying NATs may involve effort and upset at first, remember that *it will get easier with practice*. On the other hand, not tackling these thoughts leaves them free to bother you just as much in the future. There is no pain free way of overcoming depression, but as your skills improve, your efforts will help you to feel better.