

20 QUESTIONS TO HELP CHALLENGE NEGATIVE & DISTORTED THINKING

One of the most essential aspects of cognitive behavioral therapy is learning how to challenge negative and distorted thinking.

Many of us think negatively once in a while, but persistent negative thinking is often a result of anxiety and depression. What's more, most of our negative perceptions are rife with errors.

These "20 questions" will help you identify the distortion (listed in parentheses) and assist in restructuring your thoughts.

Before you begin your Socratic questioning, you'll need to label your emotion. Ask yourself:

HOW AM I FEELING? (sad, anxious, hopeless, angry, helpless, upset, worried)

Once you've identified the emotion, your next step is to connect it to REALITY. *Not your perceived* reality, but the one that you share with the rest of the world. Here you ask yourself:

WHAT AM I FEELING _____ (the emotion from above) ABOUT?

This **WHAT** question is often difficult to answer and many folks will instinctively answer it, "I don't know!" The goal of Socratic questioning is to 1) identify emotions and 2) assess whether those emotions are reality-based or distortion-based. Because "I don't know" stops the conversation, it is NOT ever an acceptable answer during your Socratic questioning.

Once you've identified the **HOW** and **WHAT** is this feeling about, you're on your way to uncovering the negative, critical, vicious, and most likely untrue messages your *pathological critic* (see *Self Esteem* by McKay & Fanning) is telling you!

Get in the habit of starting your 20 questions with these 3:

WHAT DO I THINK IS GOING TO HAPPEN?

HOW DO I KNOW?

WHAT MAKES THAT SO?

Follow the above with these 20 questions. Remember, we're asking these questions to identify what thought distortions, if any, are largely responsible for our negative mood or are exacerbating how we feel about a negative situation.

1. Am I confusing a thought or a feeling with a fact? (EMOTIONAL REASONING)

The fact that you believe something to be true doesn't necessarily mean that it is. Similarly, you assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are. Common automatic thoughts might be:

- “I feel terrified about going on airplanes. It must be very dangerous to fly.”
- “I feel guilty. I must be a horrible person.”
- “I feel angry. This proves I’m being treated unfairly.”
- “I feel so stupid. This must mean that I’m not as smart as my classmates.”
- “I feel hopeless. I must really not have anything good or worthy in my life.”

Would your judgment be accepted by others? Would it stand up in court or would it be dismissed as circumstantial? What objective, real-life evidence do you have to back it up or contradict it?

2. Am I jumping to conclusions, either by mindreading or fortune telling? (JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS)

When people are depressed or anxious they arbitrarily believe that others are thinking negatively of them. But none of us are “MIND READERS”! How do you know what someone else is thinking? While there is a chance that you’re right, it’s also highly likely that you’re incorrect or only partially correct.

“FORTUNE TELLERS” predict that things will turn out badly. You may predict that you’re going to fail a test (thereby giving up and not studying at all or making yourself so anxious that you can’t think clearly and end up failing, not because you’re stupid, but due to your anxiety!)

Remind yourself that you’re not a mind reader or a fortune teller! While it’s possible that others are thinking negatively of you or that things will turn out badly, it’s also quite possible that they may not! Stick to what you know and avoid jumping to conclusions about what others are thinking or what might be.

3. Am I assuming that I can’t do anything to change my situation? (FORTUNE TELLING)

Negativity and pessimism about the chances of changing things are central to depression. It makes you give up before you even start (resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy). Fortune telling about the future when you’re depressed will lead you to conclude that there is nothing you can do and will likely heighten your feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Remind yourself, “I don’t know that there is no solution until I try. My negative thinking and fortune telling are interfering with my problem-solving, and it’s making me turn down possible solutions without even giving them a try.”

4. Am I predicting the future instead of experimenting with it? (FORTUNE TELLING)

The fact that you acted in a certain way in the past does not mean that you are bound to make the same decisions in the future, especially if you realize that those choices were detrimental to your well-being. If you predict the future instead of trying something different, then you are effectively cutting yourself off from the chance of feeling better. Make a conscientious effort to make better choices, and I promise it will pay off. Change may be difficult, but it’s not impossible!

Your thought might be, “I’ll never manage to assert myself effectively! I never have in the past.” Try replacing it with, “The fact that I never have, does not mean that I can’t learn to communicate more assertively. It may feel uncomfortable, but if I stick with it, it will become more natural, and I’ll be more effective at it.”

5. Am I assuming that my view of things is the only one possible? (MENTAL FILTER)

In most cases, there is more than one possibility or one possible outcome. When we’re anxious or depressed we tend to jump to negative conclusions about situations, often not considering that there are MANY alternatives.

While we often convince ourselves that “it must be” how it seems to us, it’s important to keep in mind that there are other alternatives! Remember, you tend to think negatively when you’re depressed, so when you have the thought that something absolutely must be a certain way, remind yourself that your view is clouded by the veil of negativity!

6. Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms? (ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING)

You see things in black-or-white categories. If a situation falls short of perfect, you see it as a total failure. However, it’s important to keep in mind that nearly everything is relative. For example, most people are not all good or all bad and probably fall somewhere between the two extremes. Are you applying this kind of black-or-white thinking to yourself or the people in your life? If someone inadvertently says or does something that hurts your feelings, it doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re a bad person or that you can’t have a relationship with him/her.

If something goes wrong and your automatic thought is, “I did that really badly. I may as well not bother,” try to replace it with something less polarizing such as, “I may not have done as well as I wanted to, but that doesn’t mean that it was no good at all. It’s unrealistic to expect myself to do everything perfectly 100% of the time.”

This kind of thinking tends to derail people from goals they’ve set, not because they failed but because their judgment is off. For example, if you’re on a diet and you have a spoonful of ice-cream that you weren’t planning on, you may say to yourself, “I’ve blown my diet completely. I’m such a loser.” This thought would likely be so upsetting that you would proceed to finish the entire quart! A good alternative to this distortion is to say, “I didn’t blow my entire diet, I just had a spoonful. If I stop now and don’t have anymore, I’ll be fine.”

7. Am I using ultimatum words in my thinking? (OVERGENERALIZATION; ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING)

You see a single negative event (such as a rejection or being passed up for a promotion) as a never-ending pattern of defeat by using words like ALWAYS/NEVER, EVERYONE/NO ONE,

EVERYTHING/NOTHING. Most situations are actually less clear-cut than that, and it's likely more correct to think of them in terms of SOMETIMES, SOME PEOPLE, and SOME THINGS.

So, if the automatic thought is, "Everything always goes badly for me," see if you can replace the ultimatum word with something less extreme such as, "That's an exaggeration. Some things go badly for me, just like they do for others, but some things go well."

8. Am I condemning myself as a total failure on the basis of a single event? (MENTAL FILTER; OVERGENERALIZATION)

You pick out a single detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of reality becomes darkened and negative.

People who are anxious or depressed often look at difficulties, challenges or events with negative outcomes as evidence that they have no value at all and that they are horrible, stupid, good-for-nothing failures. Check in with yourself to see if you tend to make this kind of blanket judgment of yourself. If you do, it's not surprising that you're depressed!

The automatic thought might be, "I was so irritable and angry with my children earlier today. I'm a terrible mother and a horrible person." An alternative, more rational thought might be, "The fact that on a particular day, at a particular time, in a particular circumstance, I was irritable and upset does not mean that I'm a horrible mother or person. It's unreasonable to expect myself to never be irritable. I will work on communicating my frustrations more constructively, and beating myself up over what happened this morning is not going to help me do that – on the contrary, it will only make me more anxious and depressed."

Another example is when you receive many compliments but amid all the compliments are a few mild criticisms. Some people tend to obsess about the negative reactions and ignore all the positive feedback. This effectively rewrites reality and makes it look much bleaker than it actually is. This distortion is so effective that those folks wholeheartedly believe this skewed perception of reality, and use it as evidence that they are inadequate, stupid, unlovable, etc.

9. Am I mainly focusing on the negative side of things? (DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVES)

Are you focusing on everything that has gone wrong during the day, and forgetting or dismissing things that were successful or enjoyable? If you tend to do this, then your life probably seems pretty bleak to you. So, a generally good day is distorted to such an extent, that even the presence of a minor hiccup colors the whole day dark and gloomy. If your automatic thought is, "That was a really terrible day!", reframe it, "Hang on a moment! Yes, you were late for a meeting and you disagreed with your daughter, but on the whole your work went well, you had positive interactions with your daughter the rest of the day. You also enjoyed the TV show you watched with your wife earlier this evening. All in all, it wasn't a bad day. Only focusing on the bad things is a symptom of my depression, and it's not an accurate portrayal of my day."

10. Am I focusing on my weaknesses and ignoring my strengths? (DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVES)

We know that when people become depressed or anxious, they tend to look at the people and events in their world as mostly negative, so it's not surprising that they also ignore or dismiss their own strengths and positive qualities by insisting they "just don't count." If you do a good job, you may tell yourself that it wasn't good enough or that anyone could have done as well.

They tend to "forget" or overlook problems they handled successfully in the past, as well as resources that could help them overcome current difficulties. Taking a step back and allowing yourself to see yourself in less black or white ways, i.e., not just as someone who's failed but also as someone who's succeeded in the past (and probably not so long ago), will help you cope more effectively with current challenges.

For example, a common automatic thought after a divorce is, "I can't stand being alone now that Jack is gone. I can't do this without him." A rebuttal to that thought might be, "I was single before I met him and I was just fine. I made an effort to meet people, I had pretty good social skills, and I enjoyed being with others. I was happy, and I will be again."

A tendency to discount the positives takes the joy out of life and likely makes you feel inadequate and unrewarded.

11. Am I blaming myself for something that is not really my fault (PERSONALIZATION AND BLAME)?

Personalization occurs when people hold themselves wholly responsible for something that isn't entirely under their control. For example, when our family member acts out due to an alcohol problem, when our child is diagnosed with a learning disability, or when our marriage fails even though we tried to make it work... we sometimes look at these as indications that we are guilty of doing something wrong. In fact, we are likely not responsible (wholly or partially) for our family member's overdrinking, our child's learning disability, or the failure of our marriage. Similarly, a battered wife might take responsibility for her husband's abusive behavior by thinking that she must have done something wrong to deserve such treatment. Personalization often leads to irrational and disproportionate feelings of guilt, which contribute to depression and interferes with setting healthy boundaries.

12. Am I taking something personally, that may or may not be related to me? (PERSONALIZATION AND BLAME)

When things go wrong (or appear to go wrong), folks who are depressed or anxious often believe that in some way this is directed at them personally, or caused by them. In fact, it may have little or nothing to do with them.

For example, if a coworker is short with you, you may think, "Jackie doesn't like me! If she did, she never would have spoken to me that way." An alternative, less distorted thought may be,

“I’m not the only one Jackie speaks to that way when she’s on edge. It was probably her anxiety that caused that outburst. I don’t have enough evidence to conclude that she dislikes me. In fact, she’s usually quite nice to me when she’s not pressured by a deadline.”

Another example: Imagine that while driving, you pass a car that’s driven by your friend. You wave hello, but she doesn’t acknowledge you. Do you personalize it and conclude that she doesn’t like you anymore? Or that she’s a rude, good-for-nothing friend and vow to never speak to her again? Your PERSONALIZATION AND MIND READING may lead to negative feelings and the end of a perfectly good friendship. Ask yourself, “Am I sure that she doesn’t like me or that she’s rude? Maybe she didn’t see me? Or maybe I didn’t see her wave back?”

Again, personalization often leads to feelings of guilt, shame and a sense of inadequacy.

13. Am I blaming others exclusively without acknowledging my own role? (PERSONALIZATION AND BLAME)

Some people do the opposite of what’s described in #11 and #12. They blame others or their circumstances for their problems, and they overlook ways in which they might be contributing to their difficulties. This often occurs in relationships, where we minimize our own role in the breakup of the marriage or friendship. It’s important to try to be introspective and gain insight into our own contribution.

14. Am I expecting myself to be perfect? (SHOULD STATEMENTS)

It’s simply not possible to get everything right all the time. People who are depressed or anxious often set up unrealistically high standards for themselves. They then condemn themselves for making mistakes, or acting in ways they would rather not have done. Accepting that you can’t be perfect does not mean that you must give up trying to do things well. It means that you can learn from your mistakes, instead of being upset or paralyzed by them.

15. Am I worrying about the way things “should be,” instead of accepting and dealing with them as they are? (SHOULD STATEMENTS)

If you find yourself often telling yourself that you SHOULD have done better, and judge yourself or your work not to be good enough, then you likely often feel guilty or frustrated with yourself. When your should statements are directed at others, then you likely often feel angry, frustrated, and resentful.

Some people try to motivate themselves with shoulds or shouldn’ts. However, since these are often other people’s boundaries or parameters, they don’t tend to work well. Indeed, shoulds and musts tend to make us feel rebellious and lead to the urge to do the opposite. Instead of saying “I shouldn’t eat that doughnut” or “I should go to the gym,” try replacing these self-statements with “need to” or “want to” statements such as, “I don’t want to eat that doughnut.

If I do, it will make me feel sick and bloated,” or “Although I’m tired, I need to go to the gym because I feel good afterward.”

16. Am I using a double standard? (SHOULD STATEMENTS)

You may find that you expect much more of yourself than you do of others. Some people are chronically hard on themselves for even the most minor flaws, failures or imperfections, yet when others in their lives have similar drawbacks, they are easily overlooked or forgiven. Ask yourself, “How would I react to someone else in my situation? Would I be so hard on them?”

So, for example, if the automatic thought is, “I’m pathetic. I shouldn’t be so emotional. I’m such a loser!”, try this alternative thought, “If one of my friends was similarly upset in my situation, how would I react? Would I be judgmental or would I empathize with her pain and offer support? I certainly wouldn’t call her pathetic or label her a loser!”

If you can be compassionate to others, why not try being compassionate to yourself as well? I promise it won’t lead to collapse!

17. Am I exaggerating the importance of events or overestimating the chances of a disaster? (CATASTROPHIZING)

What difference does a particular event really make to your life? What will you think of it in a week, a year or 10 years? Will anyone else remember what you see as a terrible thing today? If you do, will you feel the same way about it? Probably not!

Furthermore, some people believe that if things go at all wrong, then disaster is sure to follow. If the day starts badly, it will only get worse, and of all the possible scenarios for the future, they predict and expect the worst possible outcome.

It’s important to challenge this thinking as it is the culprit in propagating anxiety that often leads to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, i.e., depression. Ask yourself, “How likely is it that what I expect will really happen? How do I know? What evidence do I have? What are the other possible outcomes? Is there anything I can do to change the course of events?”

These folks tend to make huge leaps in time and consequence. So, “I didn’t get all my work done today” leads to a prediction that “I’ll definitely get fired.” And, “If I get fired, then I’ll be homeless, and I’ll die in poverty!” Encourage yourself to STOP. THINK. STRATEGIZE. It’s extremely unlikely to you’ll get fired for not finishing your work, and if you do get fired, then you’ll strategize and mobilize yourself to get another job!

18. Am I assigning a negative label to myself? (LABELING)

Labeling is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. Instead of saying, “I made a mistake,” you globalize your ineptitude and label yourself a “loser” or a “failure” or “stupid.” We know not to label a child as “bad” but to specify that his behavior is “bad” or “wrong,” but we are not so

compassionate with ourselves. If you find yourself calling yourself names, demand that you rephrase to the specific action or behavior. So, instead of “You’re a failure,” rephrase with, “You may not have done as well as you had hoped, but with hard work, you’ll do better next time.” If you insist on calling yourself names, you will probably like yourself less and less, and you will likely stop demanding that others treat you with respect (and why should they if you don’t!).

19. Am I asking questions that have no answers?

Brooding over questions like, “How can I undo the past?” or “Why aren’t I different?” or “What’s the meaning of life?” or “Why does this always happen to me?” or “Why’s life so unfair?” are guaranteed ways to depress yourself. Try to turn them into answerable questions. If you can’t then they’re a waste of time!

For example, instead of asking yourself, “When will I feel better again?”, try redirecting yourself with, “There’s no answer to that. Going over and over it just makes me worried and upset. I’m better off working on what I can do to help myself get over this depression as quickly as possible.”

20. What are the advantages and disadvantages of thinking this way?

Many distorted thought patterns do have some pay off (not because they’re healthy but because they’re familiar) – that’s what keeps them going and what makes them so stubborn and difficult to change! But do the advantages outweigh the disadvantages? Once the goal is restructured and reflects healthy self-esteem, then the answer will likely be a firm, “NO!” Encourage yourself to stop thinking in distorted ways and focus on more adaptive and rational thinking patterns.