

## 34. Attitude Activity: Stopping Negative Thoughts

In his 1998 book, *How to Stubbornly Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable About Anything*, American psychologist Albert Ellis looked at irrational and negative thinking experienced by people in times of stress. He particularly looked at types of thoughts that people experience when things go badly. He called this 'crooked thinking'.

His work can be directly applied to students in stressful situations – see if you've experienced these kinds of thoughts when things go wrong:

- » Not fair thinking: 'I don't deserve this treatment. Things shouldn't be like this.'
- » Catastrophe thinking: 'If this goes wrong, it'll be a total nightmare.'
- » Stopper thinking: 'I'm useless. I can't do this. I'm bound to screw up.'
- » Illogical thinking: 'If this bad thing happens, this one will surely follow.'
- » Blaming thinking: 'It's his fault. It's everyone's fault except me.'
- » Overgeneralising: 'I never get the breaks. This always happens to me. Everything is going wrong in my life.'

Are any of these thoughts familiar to you? Record and categorise the kind of negative thoughts you sometimes experience:

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Ellis argued that the first step was for the individual to recognise when they were slipping into negative thinking. Once they could do that, his suggestion was 'reframing the thought positively'. He said this meant being hard on yourself. Only one person could be in charge of your thoughts – you. So you have to be firm, strong and not take any nonsense.

- » Not fair thinking becomes: 'I did what I could. It's a setback but I can handle it.'
- » Catastrophe thinking becomes: 'I'm capable of performing well. I'm well prepared.'
- » Stopper thinking becomes: 'I'm learning. I'm getting better each time I hit a challenge like this.'
- » Illogical thinking becomes: 'There's no direct connection between this and that. The past does not equal the future. Tomorrow's another day.'
- » Blaming thinking becomes: 'It's happened now. It doesn't matter whose fault it was. The important thing is to move on and learn from it.'
- » Overgeneralising becomes: 'There are a few problems I'm dealing with at the moment. Everyone has tough times and I'm no exception. But I know I'm strong enough to cope.'

Now take one of the negative thoughts you recorded above, and try to reframe it, using the examples above:

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These are the kinds of thoughts you might find yourself, or hear others, expressing in difficult times. Take the statements below and see how you might reframe them into something more positive:

- » I've never been good at exams.
- » Stuff like this always happens to me.
- » If my report is bad, my mum and dad are going to hate me.
- » I'm only going to fail, so what's the point in trying?
- » The teacher doesn't like me.
- » Nothing goes right for me. Why should geography be any different?
- » I've been rubbish at science since primary school. I should have never picked it for an A level.
- » I'm not going to get the grades to get into university, so I'll end up without a job and have a miserable life.
- » If I fail this mock, it will mean the whole term has been a disaster.
- » This is typical of my life. Nothing is easy or straightforward. I'm sick of it.

### **Final Thoughts**

Like anything worthwhile, reframing thoughts takes effort. But you'll be surprised how quickly you can turn yourself into someone much more positive and optimistic.

Your friends and peers are an important contributing factor to your mood. Have a look at The Vampire Test on page 95 for more on this.