



# *Cognitive Coping Skills: Changing Your Thoughts About Chronic Pain and Illness*

## Introduction

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The way you think about yourself and your life circumstances can affect your response to pain and other chronic symptoms. People with a positive, optimistic attitude feel good about themselves and manage unpleasant situations better than those with a negative outlook. People who think negatively often feel helpless when faced with challenges and are less likely to use healthy coping skills.

You may not be able to change your circumstances, but you can control your response to them. This material can help you adopt positive thinking patterns and improve your approach to life's challenges.

## Your Thought Patterns

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### **How thought patterns form**

Your thoughts include your self-talk (what you tell yourself), your perceptions or explanations of events, and your beliefs about yourself and others. Most thoughts and beliefs are learned, based on your experiences and conclusions about what happens to you.

Thought patterns start to form early in life. Many beliefs you hold today reflect messages you received from parents, siblings, peers and teachers or other important adults.

Your thoughts may be positive or negative. Some are based on logic, facts and reason. Others may be misconceptions that arise from lack of adequate information or from other people's opinions and beliefs.

### **The effects of positive and negative thinking**

Thoughts powerfully impact your emotional, behavioral and physical reactions to situations. Positive thoughts can encourage you and make you feel confident, satisfied or happy. Studies show that a positive, hopeful attitude helps relieve stress and improves the ability to cope with challenges. An optimistic outlook helps you tell yourself, "I can do it."

Positive thinking may improve overall health. Positive thinking helps to lessen pain and other chronic symptoms and has been linked to a stronger immune system. Positive messages also boost self-esteem. People who feel good about themselves and have a strong sense of self-worth are more likely to make healthy lifestyle choices.

Negative thinking has the opposite effect. It can make you feel sad, mad or worried. It increases stress and worsens pain and other symptoms.

People who focus on the negative often have poor self-esteem and see themselves as unable to control their life or face challenges. They are more likely to become depressed and physically inactive than those who have a positive attitude.

Research also points to a connection between thoughts and the body's physical state. Thinking negative thoughts causes heart rate, blood pressure and sweating to increase. Negative thinking that becomes a long-term pattern can lead to health problems, such as depression, high blood pressure or a weakened immune system.

### **Negative thinking and chronic symptoms**

It is easy to develop negative thought patterns when you live with chronic pain or other chronic symptoms. Fear and anxiety are particularly common reactions to a chronic condition. You may fear the worst. You may worry about injury, changes in finances, job status and increased symptoms. Such fears and worries can lead to self-limiting behavior and a self-defeating attitude.

Catastrophic thinking is another common negative thought pattern that may arise from painful or unfair situations. Often, the human tendency is to view events as much worse than they actually are. Thus, it seems natural to characterize a chronic condition as a catastrophe or disaster. For example, you may have said to yourself, "I can't take this anymore" or, "Pain has ruined my life." See Appendix A for other examples of negative thought patterns.

Remember that your perception or interpretation of situations may not always reflect facts. Perceptions may be based on inaccurate beliefs or assumptions (for example, the belief that continued pain or other symptoms can only arise from a serious illness). Distorted views of chronic pain or other symptoms can greatly increase stress, worsen symptoms and limit the ability to use effective coping skills.

Fortunately, since most thought patterns have been learned, they can be unlearned. The rest of this information outlines steps to help you change unhelpful thought patterns.

## Practicing Positive Thinking

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Perhaps you cannot avoid an unpleasant or unwanted situation. But you can choose how to handle it. One choice is to view difficult circumstances as disasters and tell yourself, "This is way too much for me." Another is to see them as challenges to be managed and think, "I'm willing to give a new approach my best effort."

Positive thinking is a technique that helps many people cope with the upsetting changes and emotions a chronic condition can produce. The goal of positive thinking is to weed out negative, inaccurate thoughts and beliefs and replace them with a fact-based, positive outlook. How can you learn to do this? The process is simple, but it takes time and practice.

Typical steps in the process are:

- Becoming aware of your thoughts and beliefs about troubling circumstances.
- Identifying negative or inaccurate thinking.
- Challenging negative or inaccurate thoughts and beliefs.
- Discovering positive, helpful thought patterns.

A daily, written record of your thoughts and experiences can help you use these steps more effectively and track your progress.

### **Becoming aware of thoughts and beliefs**

Before you can change unhelpful or self-limiting thoughts, you must become aware of them. To help you become aware of your thinking patterns, stop periodically during the day to check your thoughts, particularly those about troubling events or situations.

Your thoughts may be positive, negative or neutral. They may be rational (based on logic, reason or facts) or irrational. Record your thoughts in a notebook or journal. Be sure to include your self-talk, your interpretation of what a situation means, and your beliefs about yourself, other people and events.

### **Identifying negative or inaccurate thinking**

Your beliefs and thoughts about a situation or condition affect your reaction to it. Positive thoughts are optimistic and encouraging, and motivate you toward constructive action.

Negative or distorted thoughts and beliefs often produce undesirable physical, emotional and behavioral reactions. Negative thinking interprets difficult situations as obstacles rather than challenges. It tells you that you cannot cope with troubling events or people and should withdraw from life.

Reactions that may signal negative thinking include:

- Physical responses, such as sweating, racing heart, upset stomach or a stiff neck.
- Emotional responses, such as difficulty concentrating or feeling sad, angry, lonely or worried.
- Behavioral responses, such as avoiding tasks, spending increased time alone, eating when not hungry or blaming others for everything that happens to you.

To help you identify distorted thinking that may limit your coping abilities, record your reactions to troubling events. If you experience undesirable reactions, ask yourself, "What am I saying to myself that makes me feel sad, mad or worried?" Or, "What thoughts cause my heart to race and make me want to avoid this situation?"

### **Challenging negative or inaccurate thinking**

Next, test the accuracy of your thoughts. Decide whether your view of an event is in line with facts and logic or whether there might be other explanations for a situation. Remember that your first thoughts may not be the only possible way to view an event. Ask yourself. "Is there a different way to view this situation that might help me feel better?"

You may not easily recognize inaccuracies in your thinking. Most people have automatic, long-standing ways of thinking about life. Long-held thoughts and beliefs feel normal and factual to you, but many are simply opinions or perceptions.

Rather than routinely accepting your thinking, challenge its validity and look for other perspectives. Compare the thoughts and beliefs in your daily record to those in Appendix A to identify areas for change.

### **Changing your thoughts and beliefs**

The final step is to replace negative or inaccurate thinking with accurate thoughts and beliefs. Changing your view of a situation and of yourself can enable you to find constructive ways to cope.

This step can be the hardest. Many things can make it difficult to change negative thinking:

- Thoughts often occur spontaneously or automatically, without effort on your part. You don't always choose what you think about.
- Thoughts can be hard to control or turn off. Thoughts can distress you anytime.
- Thoughts may not be based entirely on logic.
- Thoughts can be very powerful and easily believed.
- You may not believe your thoughts can be the reason for your stress.

Changing ingrained thought patterns won't happen overnight. Time and effort are necessary to learn how to recognize and replace distressing thoughts with positive, accurate ones. The following strategies may help you approach troubling situations in a healthy way:

- **Create a list of positive statements about yourself.** Refer to the list when you feel discouraged or start to slip into old, unhealthy patterns.
- **Focus on the positive.** Find ways to put a positive spin on negative thoughts or unpleasant circumstances. Respond with affirmations of what's good about yourself. Recall times when you successfully coped with troubling situations.
- **Use hopeful statements.** Be kind and encouraging to yourself. Don't say to yourself anything you wouldn't say to someone else.
- **Try not to overreact to people or situations.** Try to objectively examine the cause of your fears. Ask yourself. "What is the worst that can happen?" "How likely is it to happen?" "What can I do even if the worst happens?"
- **Be part of the solution.** When faced with a difficult circumstance, decide what you can do about it. Taking action to improve a situation can reduce stress and keep you from feeling overwhelmed. Instead of thinking, "I can't stand this," tell yourself, "I may not like this, but I can try \_\_\_\_\_."
- **Stay on task.** Try to focus on what you need to do rather than on criticizing others. Ask yourself, "Are critical thoughts or negative beliefs helping or getting in the way of dealing with this situation?"
- **Avoid "should" and "must."** If your thoughts are full of these words, you may be setting unreasonable demands on yourself or others.
- **Relabel upsetting thoughts.** Instead of choosing to react negatively to negative thoughts, see them as signals to use new, healthy thinking patterns.
- **Create an affirming environment for change.** Spend time with people who are positive and enthusiastic about life. Avoid people and situations that draw you back into unhealthy thought patterns.
- **Seek support from others.** Encouragement from family, friends and other contacts can help you through the tough times as you work to change negative thinking patterns
- **Encourage yourself.** Give yourself credit for making positive changes.

See Appendix B for additional suggestions to help you replace negative or inaccurate beliefs.

## Contacting Your Health Care Provider

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If you have questions about this information, contact your health care provider.

## Appendix A: Negative or Inaccurate Thinking

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The following thought patterns tend to erode self-confidence and the use of healthy coping skills:

- **Filtering** — focusing only on negative aspects of people or situations while filtering out all positive aspects.  
*Example: When I have these headaches, nothing in my life is positive. Pain keeps me from being able to enjoy my life.*
- **Personalizing** — blaming yourself for anything unpleasant; thinking that everything people do or say is a reaction to you; or comparing yourself to others to determine who is smarter, better looking, etc.  
*Example: I know the picnic was canceled because no one wanted to be around me.*
- **Overgeneralizing** — basing a general conclusion on a single incident or piece of evidence; assuming that things will turn out a certain way because they did so before.  
*Example: I just can't go out and socialize. Every time I do, pain ruins it for me.*
- **Catastrophizing** — expecting disaster; convincing yourself that if something goes wrong it will be unbearable. You approach situations thinking “what if.” “What if tragedy strikes?” Or, “What if it happens to me?”  
*Example: I can't go out with friends. What if my pain acts up? Everything will be ruined.*
- **All-or-nothing thinking** — seeing things as either all good or all bad; allowing no middle ground; feeling that you must be perfect or you're a failure.  
*Example: If I can't get rid of my symptoms, I can't enjoy activities or do anything anymore.*
- **Should statements** — having a set of ironclad rules about how you and others must or ought to act; feeling guilty if you break the rules and angry or resentful if others do.  
*Example: My partner should try to help when I'm obviously in pain. He should stop what he is doing and make sure I'm okay.*
- **Control fallacies** — Seeing yourself as externally controlled, helpless or a victim of fate (blaming other people or circumstances for your difficulties); or, seeing yourself as internally controlled and responsible for your symptoms as well as the happiness of everyone around you.  
*Example: I no longer have any control over my life. My pain level dictates a good day or a bad day, and almost every day is a bad day and keeps me from making healthy lifestyle changes.*
- **Mind reading** — Thinking that you know what people are feeling and why they act as they do, particularly how people are feeling toward you.  
*Example: My physician/colleagues/friends think that the pain is all in my head. They think I have a psychological problem.*
- **Mistaking feelings for facts** — Believing that what you feel must be true. If you feel stupid and boring, then you must be stupid and boring.  
*Example: My pain makes me feel worthless. I really am just a worthless person.*
- **Martyr syndrome** — Expecting all your sacrifice and self-denial to pay off, as if someone were keeping score. You feel bitter when the reward doesn't come.  
*Example: Why do I have to suffer like this? What good will come from having to deal with this pain?*

## Appendix B: Turning Negatives Into Positives

The table below lists some negative messages people may give themselves when faced with chronic pain or other symptoms, and alternative, affirming statements to use instead.

<b>Negative/distorted beliefs</b>	<b>Positive/rational beliefs</b>
<i>Because of my pain/symptoms, I am no longer the person I was. I no longer feel loved and appreciated.</i>	<i>I may have changed somewhat physically, but I am more than just a physical being. I am worthy of love and of being appreciated for all that I am.</i>
<i>People reject me because they can see I am disabled.</i>	<i>I am not disabled. I have goals and dreams and can accomplish many things.</i>
<i>I used to be able to do so many things — now I can't do anything. I am no longer competent or adequate.</i>	<i>I can do a lot more than I thought. Almost everything I used to do I can still do to some degree.</i>
<i>I can't do anything because of my symptoms.</i>	<i>With moderation, I can be actively involved in life. I just need to pace myself and take breaks.</i>
<i>I have no control over my happiness. The pain/symptoms control me.</i>	<i>I can control my happiness. I can be happy and enjoy life even when I have pain or other symptoms.</i>
<i>People think I'm faking this.</i>	<i>People sometimes need help understanding medical issues. I can share what I know about chronic pain.</i>
<i>If my symptoms act up when I'm out with friends, I'll be embarrassed and ruin things for everyone.</i>	<i>I can help my friends understand. I can take breaks and still enjoy myself when I'm with them.</i>
<i>Medical science can do so much. Surely there must be a cure for my symptoms.</i>	<i>Even if medical science can't fix everything, I can choose my response and focus on self-care skills.</i>
<i>People at work are upset with me. I have restrictions and they think I am not doing my share.</i>	<i>I will do the best job I can. If people don't understand, that's their problem — I can't please everyone.</i>