

# **Ways to Enhance Positive Thought Patterns**

Adapted from: *Change Your Brain, Change your Life* by Daniel G. Amen, MD

Written by: Alwlynn Lamp, M.Ed.

## **How to kill the ANTs** (Automatic Negative Thoughts)

- ◆ ***Realize that thoughts are real*** – First you have a thought, next your brain releases chemicals, then an electrical transmission goes across your brain, and finally you become aware of what you're thinking.
- ◆ ***Notice how negative thoughts affect your body*** – Every time you have an angry, unkind, sad or cranky thought, your body releases chemicals that activate your brain's limbic system.
- ◆ ***Notice how positive thoughts affect your body*** – Every time you have a good, happy, hopeful or kind thought, your brain releases chemicals that cool your brain's limbic system.
- ◆ ***Notice how your body reacts to every thought you have*** – the limbic system is responsible for translating our emotional state into physical feelings of relaxation or tension. Your body reacts to *every* thought you have, whether about friends, family or anything else.
- ◆ ***Think of negative thoughts as pollution*** – Every cell in your body is affected by every thought you have. Negative thoughts pollute your limbic system, your mind, and your body.
- ◆ ***Understand that your automatic thoughts don't always tell the truth*** – Even if your thoughts just happen, they are not necessarily correct. You don't have to believe every thought that goes through your head. It is important to think about your thoughts to see if they help you or hurt you.
- ◆ ***Talk back to ANTs (Automatic Negative Thoughts)*** When you just think a negative thought without challenging it, your mind believes it and your body reacts to it. When you correct negative thoughts, you take away their power over you. You can learn to change your thoughts, and you can learn to change the way you feel.

- ◆ ***Exterminate the ANTs*** – one way to crush the ANTs is to write them down and talk back to them. This does not require being dishonest with yourself. There are nine types of ANTs:
1. *“Always/never” thinking* – This happens when you think something that happened will “always” repeat itself, or that you’ll “never” get what you want. Words like *always, never, no-one, every one, every time, everything* are usually wrong. If you catch yourself thinking in these absolutes, stop and make yourself recall examples that disprove your all or nothing attitude.
  2. *Focusing on the negative* – This occurs when your thoughts reflect only the bad in a situation and ignore any of the good. This doesn’t mean being dishonest with yourself, but you can actively seek to find the positive to give more balance and optimism to a world you experience too often as negative.
  3. *Fortune-telling* – This is where you predict the worst possible outcome to a situation. Just having this thought will make you feel tense. This is a RED-ANT, because when you predict bad things, you help make them happen. If you could see the future, you’d be a lottery billionaire by now!
  4. *Mind reading* – This happens when you believe that you know what other people are thinking, even when they haven’t told you. This is also a RED-ANT. Dr. Amen tells people, “please don’t read my mind, I have enough trouble reading it myself!” A negative look from someone may mean nothing more than that he or she has a stomach ache. You can’t read anyone else’s mind.
  5. *Thinking with your feelings* – This occurs when you believe your negative thoughts without ever questioning them, usually thoughts that start with the words “I feel”. You tell yourself, “I feel this way, so it must be so.” Feelings are very complex and often based on powerful memories from the past. Feelings sometimes lie to you, but they are just feelings, not necessarily the truth. Look for the evidence behind the feeling to check its truth.
  6. *Guilt beating* – these happen when you think with words like *should, must, ought* or *have to*. Guilt is not a helpful emotion for the limbic system and may cause you to do things you don’t want to do. It is better to replace “guilt beatings” with phrases

like “I want to do....” “It fits with my goals to do....” “It would be helpful to do....”. Guilt isn’t productive. Get rid of the emotional turbulence it produces and that holds you back from achieving the goals you want.

7. *Labeling* – Whenever you attach a negative label to yourself or to someone else, you stop your ability to take a clear look at the situation – you lump yourself or the other person into a category that leaves you unable to deal with him/her in a reasonable way, and prevents recognizing him/her as a unique individual.
8. *Personalizing* – occurs when you invest innocuous events with personal meaning, such as “My teacher frowns when she looks at me. She must hate me”. There are many reasons for other’s behavior besides the negative explanations that an overactive limbic system picks out. You never fully know why people do what they do. Try not to personalize the behavior of others.
9. *Blaming* – this is the most poisonous RED-ANT, very harmful. When you blame something or someone else for the problems in your life, you become a passive victim of circumstances and you make it very difficult to do anything to change your situation. The bottom-line thinking in the “blame game” goes like: “If only you would do something differently, I wouldn’t be in this predicament. It’s your fault and I’m not responsible.” The “blame game” hurts your personal sense of power – stay away from it.

## *How to feed your ANTeater*

### *ANT*

### *Species of ANT*

### *Kill the ANT*

You never listen to me.

“Always/Never” Thinking

I get frustrated when you don’t listen to me, but I know you have listened to me in the past and will again.

The teacher doesn’t like me.

Mind Reading

Maybe he’s just having a bad day. Teachers are people too.

The whole class will laugh at me.

Fortune-Telling

I don’t know that. Maybe they’ll really like my presentation.

I’m stupid.

Labeling

Sometimes I do things without thinking about the consequences, but I’m not stupid.

It’s the teacher’s fault

Blaming

I need to look at my part of the problem and look for ways that I can make the situation better.

I feel as if the FCAT is impossible for me.

Thinking with your feelings

In the past the FCAT has been hard for me. I’ll be disappointed if it is hard again this year, all I can do is my best.

**EVENT:** Write out the event that is associated with your thoughts and feelings:

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