Negative thoughts influence your feelings and actions and can drive mental health symptoms. Automatic negative thoughts are those deeply-held, and often repeated, pessimistic thoughts that lead to intense emotions and wayward actions. Negative thoughts that accompany depression, anxiety, and frustration, and other emotional disorders are often irrational and exaggerated, making it difficult to change. Once you can recognize these thoughts for what they are, you can start analyzing them and change your thinking. In this lesson, examine the thoughts and beliefs that influence your feelings and actions. Learn to recognize, refute, and replace negative thoughts with positive substitutions; repeating the process as often as necessary. This will help you strengthen your commitment to staying emotionally healthy.

This mental health e-lesson is available at journeytorecovery.com
OVERCOMING AUTOMATIC NEGATIVE THINKING

Negative thoughts influence your feelings and actions and can drive mental health symptoms. Automatic negative thoughts (ANTs for short) are those deeply-held, and often repeated, pessimistic thoughts that lead to intense emotions and wayward actions. ANTs can ruin any picnic and derail your positive mood. Every automatic negative thought carries a crumb of truth. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on which thoughts are distorted and which are accurate. It may be difficult to identify the distorted thoughts at first. Negative thoughts that accompany depression, anxiety, and frustration, and other emotional disorders are often irrational and exaggerated, making it difficult to change. Once you can recognize these thoughts for what they are, you can start analyzing them and change your thinking.

THE FIVE Rs OF CHANGED THINKING

Consider the following five-step process to evaluate your thinking.

1. RECOGNIZE negative thoughts.
2. REFUTE negative thoughts.
3. REPLACE negative thoughts with positive thoughts.
4. REHEARSE the positive substitution.
5. REPEAT the process as necessary.

(See graphic page 5)
Let's examine each of these more carefully.

1. **RECOGNIZE negative thoughts.**
   
   Oftentimes we have difficulty recognizing our negative thoughts for what they are. As you get stronger emotionally, you will become better able to recognize pessimistic and destructive thoughts as they come. Recognition of the intrusive, negative thought allows you to take it captive, weigh its validity, and either accept or reject it.

   Identify three negative thoughts you’ve had recently.
   
   1. ____________________________________________________________________
   
      ____________________________________________________________________
   
   2. ____________________________________________________________________
   
      ____________________________________________________________________
   
   3. ____________________________________________________________________
   
      ____________________________________________________________________

2. **REFUTE negative thoughts.**
   
   As you analyze each thought, determine if it is destructive and damaging. If it is, you can decline it and discard it, saying, “That is not true and I will not accept it.” You can kick it to the side and refuse to entertain it as legitimate. Do not believe every thought you have is true, wholesome, and helpful. Determine if it is true, and reject it when it is not. When you listen to the radio or watch TV, you will likely hear or see a commercial asking you to come down and buy a new car. You instantly identify the thought as irrelevant information and a request that does not apply to you. You disregard the commercial without giving it any consideration. Our thoughts can be reviewed in a similar way. We have many thoughts each day presenting distorted information and inappropriate requests. It is important we learn to kick those thoughts to the side. Many of our own thoughts are distorted, inaccurate, and mistaken; treat them as such.

   Glance back at the negative thoughts you wrote previously and write a statement rejecting, refusing, or refuting each of them.

   1. ____________________________________________________________________
      ____________________________________________________________________
   
   2. ____________________________________________________________________
   
      ____________________________________________________________________
   
   3. ____________________________________________________________________
   
      ____________________________________________________________________
3 REPLACE negative thoughts with positive thoughts.

After you have refused a negative thought, find a positive alternative or substitute. Think about things that are true, right, and wholesome. “I can’t do this” becomes “I am making progress.” Write a positive alternative for each of the following negative thoughts.

I can’t do anything right.
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

No one loves or cares about me.
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

I’m an idiot.
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

My future is hopeless.
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

I will never beat this addiction.
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

Look back at the statements you wrote at the top of page 2 and write a positive substitute for each one.

1. ____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

2. ____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

3. ____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

4 REHEARSE the positive substitution.

Because the negative thought or negative line of thinking has been repeated so many times in the past, it will be necessary to rehearse the positive substitution many times as well. You can replace negative and fear-based self-talk with positive, realistic, and empowering statements. It may take some practice for the positive substitutions to feel natural, so repeat them often and with confidence. You may find it helpful to write positive self-statements on a card and keep it with you. Perhaps you could rehearse your positive statements when standing in line, early in the morning, or while walking on the treadmill.
Name a time, and the strategy you will use, to rehearse your positive substitutions.
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________

5 **REPEAT the process as necessary.**
As you work through this process, there is likely another negative thought on its way. Repeat the steps as often as necessary in order to stay upbeat and at peace. Challenge your worries and fears as often as it takes.

List three to five situations you are likely to face where your thoughts become increasingly more negative. Reflect on various ways to diligently use the Five Rs.
1. ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________

2. ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________

3. ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________

4. ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________

5. ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________
NOW! HERE! THIS!

One patient, in her recovery, had typical difficulties with intruding and distracting negative thoughts. To increase her level of attention and gain better control over her thoughts, she made herself narrow her focus. She reminded herself of this goal by taking the phrase “now hear this” and turning it into “Now! Here! This!”

This simple twist of grammar helped her to manage her thinking and to stay in the moment. “What am I working on right now, here in this present moment – I need to focus on this.”

DIGGIN’ UP BONES

For someone struggling with mental health problems, it is easy to rehearse what you did and wished you didn’t, what you said and wished you hadn’t said in a particular way. Clients often rehearse their last lost job, their last ruined relationship, the damage they have done to their children, the strain they feel with their parents, lost money, lost sleep, lost opportunity, and the myriad of difficulties that lie ahead. To quote the painful, poetic lyrics of a Randy Travis song:

I'm diggin' up bones, I'm diggin' up bones,
Exhuming things that's better left alone.
And I'm resurrecting mem'ries of a love that's dead and gone.
Yeah, tonight I'm sittin' alone, diggin' up bones.

(Overstreet, 1986)

All too often we get drawn away from the present moment, distracted by the imperfect past and the unknown future. By fretting about our mistakes we’ve made...
and worrying about what lies ahead, we fail to keep the present moment in proper focus. It is, of course, impossible to correct our past mistakes by constantly rehearsing them. Also, it is impossible to fully control the future by constantly worrying about what might go wrong in the hours and days ahead.

**STAY IN THE PRESENT**

Being able to stay in the present helps you to enjoy your surroundings. It is seemingly impossible to appreciate fully the world around you or the people within it if your mind is taking trips into the frightening future or visiting graveyards of the ruined past. Remind yourself to be grateful for what you have rather than constantly reviewing what you don’t have or have recently lost. Develop the habit of writing a gratitude list, speaking it out loud when you can. Reviewing what you’re thankful for reduces bitterness and keeps you in a positive state right where you’re at. When our concentration is broken or fragmented we lose the joy and beauty of the present moment. Stay attuned to where you are right now and focus your energy toward making the most of the present moment.

**CHANGE YOUR THINKING**

Using the Five Rs is a process that promotes positive thinking in the present moment. It is easy to be led by your feelings and become emotionally intense and highly reactive. Your history may include significant loss, problems in relationships, or traumatic experiences in your life. You cannot change the past but you can change the intensity of the negative appraisal that comes when you revisit the past. Eliminating negative and distorted thoughts and rehearsing positive substitutions will help you stay emotionally healthy. You can make progress when you stay emotionally balanced and focus on solutions. Use this method regularly, confident that positive changes in your mindset and life will follow.

**SOURCE**