

BASIC TRAINING FOR YOUR THINKING

Direct and Correct Your Brain's Thoughts

“I know I’m going to fail the test.”

“I can’t teach a class that has more than 30 students in it.”

“The teacher never listens to what I say.”

“I think my teacher hates me.”

“There is no way we can be effective with these budget cuts.”

Do any of these thoughts sound familiar? If so, you have been lying to yourself. These kinds of thoughts are LIES, and they prevent you from getting the body and the brain you want. The good news is you don’t have to believe every stupid lie that goes through your head. Even better, you can talk back to the lies. How many of you were good at talking back to your parents as teenagers? I was excellent! You need to be good at talking back to yourself.

Most of us never give thinking a second thought (pun intended). Thinking comes naturally to all of us. In all our years of education, nobody ever teaches us how to think, what to think, or what not to think. For many of us, it is a free-for-all in our minds, with random thoughts racing through without any rhyme or reason. For others of us, we get stuck on the same repetitive negative thoughts and can’t get rid of them. Is this good for our brains? No! Is this good for our bodies? No! Our negative thinking has taken control of our brains, and we need to take control back. It is time for boot camp for your thinking. Improved brain function, a better figure, enhanced moods, greater immunity, and glowing skin will be your reward. All that just from thinking about thinking! I guess your thoughts really do deserve a second thought.

Your thoughts are powerful and they cause physical reactions in your brain and body. Bad, mad, sad, hopeless, or helpless thoughts release chemicals that make you feel bad. Your hands get cold, you start to sweat more, your heart rate quickens and flattens (which isn’t good for your health), you breathe faster and more shallowly, and your muscles tense up. An Amen Clinics study showed that negative thinking causes serious decreases in activity in the cerebellum and temporal lobes. When activity in the cerebellum is low, it makes it harder for you to think and process information quickly — definitely not something you want to happen when have to decide whether or not to accept that third glass of wine your host just offered you or if you want to supersize your meal like the fast-food cashier just asked you.

On the other hand, happy, positive, hopeful, loving thoughts release chemicals that make you feel good. Your hands feel warmer, you sweat less, your heart rate slows and starts to bounce around (which is a good thing), your breathing slows and deepens, and your muscles relax. The same study showed that positive thoughts enhance brain function.

Get rid of the ANTs (automatic negative thoughts) that infest your brain. ANTs are

the negative thoughts that enter your head throughout the day, make you feel bad, and prevent you from adopting healthy behaviors. They sabotage your healthy eating plans, diminish your desire to exercise, destroy your self-esteem, and make you feel rotten.

I came up with the concept of ANTs as a way to help my younger patients understand the notion of negative thoughts. One day, I came home to an ant invasion in my kitchen. There were thousands of the creepy crawlers everywhere. I grabbed the bug spray and started spraying to kill them. As I was spraying them, I thought, “These ants are just like the thoughts inside my patients’ brains.” A few ants aren’t a big deal, but when you have an infestation, it spoils your day. The ANTs in your head are just the same. A negative thought here and there isn’t too troublesome, but if you have thousands of awful thoughts, it makes you feel awful.

9 Species of ANTs

In my practice, I have identified nine “species” of ANTs that can steal your happiness and ruin your life.

1. **All or nothing:** Thinking that things are either all good or all bad. If you stick to your exercise plan for a month, you think you are the best athlete ever. If you miss a day at the gym, you give up your gym membership and go back to being a couch potato.
2. **Always thinking:** overgeneralizing a situation and usually starting thoughts with words like *always, never, everyone, every time*.
3. **Focusing on the negative:** Preoccupying yourself with what’s going wrong in a situation and ignoring the positive.
4. **Thinking with your feelings:** Believing your negative feelings without ever questioning them.
5. **Guilt beating:** Thinking with words like *should, must, ought, or have to* that produce feelings of guilt.
6. **Labeling:** Attaching a negative label to yourself or others.
7. **Fortune telling:** Predicting the worst.
8. **Mind reading:** Thinking you know what somebody else is thinking even though they have not told you and you have not asked them.
9. **Blame:** Blaming others for your problems.

Change your thinking, change your brain and body. When you learn to challenge and correct negative, lying thoughts, you take away their power to control you and your body. Instead, by taking control of your thinking, you also take control of your actions and behaviors

so you can enhance brain function and have a body you love. By changing your thinking, you can make yourself healthier, happier, and more successful. Here is a concept I use with a lot of my patients to help them take charge of their thinking.

Develop an ANTeater in your brain that can eat up all the negative thoughts that come into your head and mess up your life. Teach your ANTeater to talk back to the pesky ANTs so you can free yourself from negative thoughts. Whenever you feel mad, sad, nervous, or frustrated, write out your thoughts and the ANT species, then write down what your ANTeater would say to that ANT to kill it. As soon as you write down the truth, it diffuses any negative feelings, and you start to feel better. Look at the following chart for examples of how to talk back to your ANTs.

My ANTeater Chart		
<i>Whenever you feel mad, sad, nervous, or frustrated, use the following chart to write out your thoughts and talk back to them.</i>		
ANT	Species	ANTeater
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Sample ANTeater Chart

ANT	Species	ANTeater
I didn't do well on the test. I'm going to fail the class.	All or nothing	If I study harder next time I will do better.
I know I'm going to get laid off.	Fortune telling	I don't know that. If I excel as in the classroom, I may not get a pink slip.
It is your fault.	Blame	I need to take responsibility for my own actions and behaviors.

The Work: A simple but effective way to kill ANTs

One of my favorite books, *Loving What Is*, comes from my friend Byron Katie. In this very wise book, Katie, as her friends call her, describes an amazing transformation that took place in her own life. At the age of forty-three, Katie, who had spent the previous ten years of her life in a downward spiral of rage, despair, and suicidal depression, woke up one morning to discover that all those horrible emotions were gone. In their place were feelings of utter joy and happiness. Katie's great revelation, which came in 1986, was that it is not life that makes us feel depressed, angry, abandoned, and despairing, rather it is our thoughts that make us feel that way. This insight led Katie to the notion that our thoughts could just as easily make us feel happy, calm, connected, and joyful.

It also led her to realize that our minds and our thoughts affect our bodies. "The body is never our problem. Our problem is always a thought that we innocently believe," she wrote in her book *On Health, Sickness, and Death*. In the same book, she also wrote, "Bodies don't crave, bodies don't want, bodies don't know, don't care, don't get hungry or thirsty. It is what that mind attaches—ice cream, alcohol, drugs, sex, money—that the body reflects. There are no physical addictions, only mental ones. Body follows mind. It doesn't have a choice."

Katie wanted to share her revelation with others to help them end their suffering by changing their thinking. She developed a simple method of inquiry — the Work — to question our thoughts. The Work is simple. It consists of writing down any bothersome, worrisome, or negative thoughts, then asking ourselves four questions, and then doing a turnaround. The goal of the Work isn't pie-in-the-sky positive thinking; it is accurate thinking. The four questions are:

1. Is it true? (Is the negative thought true?)
2. Can I absolutely know that it is true?

3. How do I react when I think that thought?
4. Who would I be without the thought? Or how would I feel if I didn't have the thought?

After you answer the four questions, you take your original thought and turn it around to its opposite, and ask yourself whether the opposite of the original thought that is causing your suffering is not true or even truer. Then, turn the thought around and apply it to yourself (how does the opposite of the thought apply to me personally?). Then, turn the thought around to the other person, if the thought involves another person (how does the opposite apply to the other person?).

I have done the Work myself, and it helped me get through a very painful period of grief. When I did the Work, I immediately felt better. I was more relaxed, less anxious, and more honest in dealing with my own thoughts and emotions. Now, I always carry the four questions with me, and I use them a lot in my practice and with my friends and family.

Here is an example of how to use the four questions to kill the ANTs that are keeping you achieving your goals. Jenna, 15, has a math test this week. Here is what she said:

Negative Thought: "I will never pass the test."

Question #1: Is it true that you will not pass the test?

"Yes," she said.

Question #2: Can you absolutely know that it is true that you will not pass the test?

Initially she said yes because math was her worst subject. Then she thought about it and said, "Well, maybe if I studied really hard and met with a tutor I could pass."

Question #3: How do you feel when you have the thought "I will never pass the test?"

"I feel anxious, and I feel like a failure. I'm afraid that I will fail the class and have to take summer school, which means I won't be able to hang out with my friends and they won't like me anymore."

Question #4: Who would you be without the thought "I will never pass the test?"

She thought about it for a moment then said, "I wouldn't feel so nervous about it and I would probably feel better."

Turnaround: What is the opposite thought of "I will never pass the test?"

Jenna thought about it and said that if she studies hard, "I will pass the test." Then she felt a sense of empowerment that encouraged her to study rather than avoiding it.

I can tell you that the students in the Amen Clinics Making A Good Brain Great High School Course find the lesson on ANTs to be one of the most beneficial for them. They are usually shocked to discover that they don't have to believe every stupid thought they have and that they can talk back to their thoughts. They always wonder: "Why didn't anybody ever teach us this?" Teaching students to control their thinking should be required in every school.

Train your brain to look at the positive: Where you bring your brain's attention determines how you feel. When you focus on anxious, fearful, depressing, negative thoughts, you feel stressed. When you focus on positive, optimistic, grateful thoughts, you feel happy, relaxed, and motivated. Along the same lines, when you focus on what you dislike about coworkers and students you create negativity and tension in the relationship, and when you focus on what you like, you actually encourage more positive behavior.

This message has reached our neighbors to the North. We recently received an order from a school division in Saskatchewan, Canada, that bought 450 copies of my book *What I Learned from a Penguin*. The Canadian school division is planning to hand it out to all of their teaching staff, administrators, bus drivers, lunch ladies, and more, at a district-wide conference they are having.

The focus of the book is how to help people change and think positive. Too often, we pay attention to negative behavior and ignore the positive. We do this as parents, teachers, coaches, employers, siblings, and even as children! We are rarely taught the benefit and power of positive reinforcement. Instead, we focus on the negative and expect automatic change.

I was inspired to write this simple book after taking my son to a sea animal park in Hawaii. While watching a penguin named Fat Freddy perform in a stunt show, I was astonished to see the penguin perform so well. "If only I could get my son to behave that well," I thought to myself. I decided to talk with the trainer after the show to find out how she got the penguin to follow all of her directions. What she told me changed my whole perspective on how I was dealing with my son's frustrating behavior. Thanks to Fat Freddy I learned the power of positive reinforcement. This book offers people of all ages a valuable, life-changing lesson. Notice what you like more than what you don't!

Learn to direct your thinking to improve your life. Clear, focused, written goals are essential to achieving what you want in life. They also strengthen your PFC, which is involved in planning and forethought. Your PFC needs clear direction. I have my patients do an exercise called the One Page Miracle (OPM). It is extremely powerful. I call this exercise the One Page Miracle because it makes such a dramatic difference in the lives of those who practice it.

Here are the steps: On a piece of paper, write down the specific goals you have for your life, including your health, relationships, work, and money. Then place it somewhere where you are sure to see it everyday, such as on the refrigerator, on your bathroom mirror, or on your desk at work. This way, on a daily basis, you will be focusing on what's important to you. When you are focused on what you want, it makes it much easier to match your behavior to make it happen. Ask yourself everyday, "Is my behavior today getting me what I want?"