

ANT Therapy and Worksheet

Correcting the Automatic Negative Thoughts That Steal Your Happiness and Rob Your Joy

One of the most effective techniques we use with all patients at Amen Clinics is what we call ANT Therapy, or learning how to kill the ANTs (automatic negative thoughts). I coined this term in the early 90s after a hard day at the office with many patients in crisis. After coming home that evening I found an ant infestation in my kitchen. Gross!! As I started to clean up the thousands of ants, the acronym came to me. I thought of my patients from that day—like my infested kitchen, my patients' brains were also infested by the negative thoughts that were robbing them of their joy and stealing their happiness. The next day I brought a can of ant spray to work as a visual aid and have been working diligently ever since to help my patients eradicate their ANTs.

Here are the "ANT Killing" principles we use to help people feel better fast.

1. Every time you have a thought, your brain releases chemicals?

That's how our brains work: you have a thought ... your brain releases chemicals ... an electrical transmission goes across your brain and you become aware of what you're thinking. Thoughts are real and they have a direct impact on how you feel and how you behave.

2. Every time you have a mad thought, an unkind thought, a sad thought, or a cranky thought, your brain releases negative chemicals that make you feel bad.

Think about the last time you were mad. How did you feel physically? When most people are mad, their muscles get tense, their heart beats faster, their hands start to sweat, and they may even begin to feel a little dizzy. Your body reacts to every negative thought you have.

3. Every time you have a good thought, a happy thought, a hopeful thought, or a kind thought your brain releases chemicals that make your body feel good. Think about the last time you had a really happy thought. What did you feel inside your body? When most people are happy their muscles relax, their heartbeat and breath slow. Your body also reacts to your good thoughts.

4. Thoughts are very powerful! They can make your mind and body feel good or they can make you feel bad. Every cell in your body is affected by every thought you have. That is why when people get emotionally upset they often develop physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches.

5. Thoughts lie; they lie a lot, but it is your unquestioned or uninvestigated thoughts that make us sad, mad, nervous, or out of control. Unfortunately, if you never challenge your thoughts you just "believe them." The negative thoughts invade your mind like ants at a picnic. One negative thought, like one ant at a picnic, is not a big deal. Two or three negative thoughts, like two or three ants at a picnic, become more irritating. And ten or twenty negative thoughts can cause real problems.

6. You can train your thoughts to be positive and hopeful or you can just allow them to be negative and upset you. Once you learn about your thoughts, you can choose to think good thoughts and feel good, or you can choose to think bad thoughts and feel lousy. That's right, it's up to you. Research has shown that positive emotions—especially a sense of awe—can reduce inflammation that will hurt your health. You can learn how to change your thoughts and change the way you feel.

Nine Different Types of ANTs

(or ways we distort reality to make it worse than it really is)

1. All or nothing thinking: thoughts that things are all good or all bad.

2. "Always" thinking: thinking in words like always, never, no one, every-one, every time, everything.

3. Focusing on the negative: only seeing the bad in a situation.
4. Fortune telling: predicting the worst possible outcome to a situation with little or no evidence for it.
5. Mind reading: believing you know what another person is thinking even though they haven't told you.
6. Thinking with your feelings: believing negative feelings without ever questioning them.
7. Guilt beatings: thinking in words like "should, must, ought or have to."
8. Labeling: attaching a negative label to yourself or to someone else.
9. Blame: blaming someone else for the problems you have.

(RED ANT)

ANT Killing Exercise:

Whenever you feel sad, mad, nervous or out of control, write down your automatic negative thoughts, label them, then talk back to them.

Here are some ANT Killing examples:

ANT	Species of ANT	Kill the ANT
My wife never listens to me	Always Thinking	That's just not true. She often listens to me. Today she is just distracted.
The boss doesn't like me.	Mind Reading	I don't know that for sure. Maybe she's just having a bad day. I need to talk to her.

I'm a failure.	Labeling	Sometimes I fail, but I always look to learn from it.
It's my husband's fault.	Blame	I will look at my part of the problem and look for ways to make it better.

Your thoughts matter. Kill the ANTs and train your thoughts to be positive and it will benefit your mind, mood, and body.

Kill the ANTs Worksheet:

When you notice an ANT:

1. Write it down.
2. Identify the type of ANT it is.
3. Kill the ANT by talking back to it – challenge the thought!

What's your ANT?

What type of ANT is it?

Kill the ANT by challenging it!

5 Questions to Emotional Freedom

Another technique we teach patients comes from my friend Byron Katie. Again, whenever you feel sad, mad, nervous, or out of control write down the ANT. Then ask yourself 5 simple questions.

Automatic Negative Thought:

1. Is it true?

2. Can I absolutely know that it is true?

3. How do I feel when I believe the thought?

4. Who would I be or how would I feel without the thought?

5. Turn the thought around to its opposite and ask yourself if the opposite of the thought that is troubling you may, in fact, be true?

Core Belief Exercise

The Downward Arrow Technique (If You Lose Your Pen, You Will Die)

The **Downward Arrow Technique** is a tool to help uncover the belief systems that influence our behaviour and mood. These belief systems are often unclear to us and uncovering them can make it easier to notice them and not act on them via painful patterns of destructive behaviour. Although there are many types of belief, there are two main types: **core beliefs** and **core fears**. Below are the steps to uncover each type followed by some suggestions about what to do to challenge core beliefs and core fears.

Here is the technique for uncovering a core belief.

1. **Write down a thought that has been bothering you.**
2. **Ask yourself “What does this mean about me?”**
3. **Keep going until you get to the underlying core belief.**

For example:

My thought: *My friend was rude to me when she blurted out a secret I had told her.*

What does this mean about me? *It means that she doesn't care about me.*

What does that mean about me? *It means that she isn't really my friend.*

What does that mean about me? *It means that I don't have good friends that respect and care about me properly.*

What does that mean about me? *It means that there is something wrong with me where people don't respect or care about me?*

What does that mean about me? *I am not worth caring about or respecting.*

Core belief: I am not worth caring about.

Here is the technique for uncovering a core fear:

1. **Write down a thought that has been bothering you.**
2. **Ask yourself “What is the worst thing that could happen?”**
3. **Keep going until you get to the underlying core fear.**

For example:

My thought: *My boss is angry with me.*

What is the worst thing that could happen? *She might fire me.*

What is the worst thing that could happen? *I would be unemployed.*

What is the worst thing that could happen? *I might not be able to find another job for a long time (6 months)*

What is the worst thing that could happen? *I wouldn't be able to pay my mortgage.*

What is the worst thing that could happen? *I wouldn't have anywhere to live. I might become homeless.*

Core Fear: I will become homeless

How To Challenge Core Beliefs and Core Fears.

Sometimes it will be immediately clear to you that the core belief/fear is illogical. For example, you might immediately understand the chance of homelessness from unemployment is very low. So you might not be so concerned about it because you understand the unconscious fear. The picture contains an example of this.

Lost your pen = no pen
No pen = no notes
No notes = no study
No study = fail
Fail = no diploma
No Diploma = no work
No work = no money
No money = no food
No food = skinny
Skinny = ugly
Ugly = no love
No love = no marriage
No marriage = no children
No children = alone
Alone = depression
Depression = sickness
Sickness = Death

However, many people find their core beliefs/fears and think that the belief is very true. For example, you might really believe that you aren't worthy of care or respect from others because there have been so many times when others haven't respected you.

If you believe the belief/fear then a skill called thought challenging (or cognitive restructuring) can be very helpful. This skill involves writing down all of the reasons why the belief ISN'T true. For example: you might make a list of all of the times when people HAVE been respectful or make a list of the reasons why you DESERVE respect as much as the next person or make a list about the reasons why people's disrespect was more about them than about you etc.