

# Basis and confrontation of automatic negative thoughts



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The human mind is a complex machine that links together cognitions, physical feelings and emotions. Psychologist Aaron Beck developed his theory on cognitive with a heavy emphasis on the phenomenon of automatic thoughts. He noticed that people who experienced depression “ exhibited a negative bias in their interpretation or thinking,”(as cited by Corey, 2009, p. 288). Beck believed that this negative bias tended to lead to self deprecation and ultimately to feelings of depression.

According to Beck, automatic thoughts are personalized beliefs that are triggered by internal or external events and stimuli that result in an emotional response (as cited by Corey, 2009, p. 288). A study by Ingram, Atkinson, Slater, Saccuzzo and Garfin stated that “ negative automatic thoughts are proposed to consist of generalized deprecatory self-statements that are recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive” (Ingram, R. E., Atkinson, J. H., Slater, M. A., Saccuzzo, D. P. and Garfin, S. R., 1990 p. 302). In other words, they are default thought processes a person can be programmed with that affects how they respond to life. This programming can be due to values and beliefs about the self or situations, and can be both positive and negative. Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs) have been linked to depression through Beck’s research as well as through other studies, and have been linked to other emotional disturbances such as anxiety and even physical symptoms of pain (Ingram, R. E., Atkinson, J. H., Slater, M. A., Saccuzzo, D. P. and Garfin, S. R. 1990, p. 300 and 309).

With the discovery of ANTs and an awareness that they were a problem and resulted in negative effects, researchers began to look into how these thoughts come to be. A few, including Beck and Weishaar (2008) as well as <https://assignbuster.com/basis-and-confrontation-of-automatic-negative-thoughts/>

Dattilio and Freeman (1992) concluded that ANTs were a result of misconceptions of the world based on flawed thinking, which have been called cognitive distortions (as cited by Corey, 2009, P288-299). These cognitive distortions are thought to be the framework which encourages the development of ANTs.

According to Beck and Weishaar (2008) and Dattilio and Freeman (1992), one cognitive distortion is known as arbitrary inference, which is an exaggerated version of the common behavior known as jumping to conclusions. Someone experiencing an ANT of this variety might tend to think only about the worst possible outcomes of a situation (as cited by Corey, 2009, p. 288). An example of this might be a woman who notices that her mobile phone battery has run out of power, and starts to worry about what will happen if she were to have some sort of emergency that required phoning for help. A cognitive distortion related to arbitrary inference is magnification of an experience. A person who views a situation in a magnified manner may give it more attention and thought than really necessary, such as in the case of the woman and her mobile phone. The opposite, minimalization, involves giving a situation less attention or thought than it warrants, such as feeling that being physically abused by one's spouse is not a problem that needs to be dealt with.

According to Beck and Weishaar (2008) and Dattilio and Freeman (1992), another cognitive distortion is selective abstraction, which occurs when the person experiencing it bases a conclusion on one detail of an event, despite all other information available (as cited by Corey, 2009, p. 288-289). An example could be when a woman notices that her spouse didn't kiss her  
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goodbye before leaving for work, and immediately assumes something is wrong with their relationship. Her spouse may have also announced that he was late or been running about in a panic, but with this cognitive distortion she would base her conclusion solely on one piece of information, ignoring all others.

This distortion is similar to overgeneralization, in that it involves basing judgments on one piece of information. According to Beck and Weishaar (2008) and Dattilio and Freeman(1992), in overgeneralization, one event or experience results in the subject believing that all events will be the same and should be treated the same way (as cited by Corey, 2009. p. 288). An example of this could be a teacher seeing a group of boys playing roughly at recess, and that teacher automatically assumes that all boys (or even all children) engage in rough play at all times. These cognitive distortions would lead to an individual seeing the world as something that it is not.

Personalization is a cognitive distortion that can be especially painful to deal with. According to Beck and Weishaar (2008) and Dattilio and Freeman(1992), a person with this thought process will create a relationship between external events and the self. This can lead to negative self views and blame, such as a parent feeling extremely hurt when their child does something they don't approve of (as cited by Corey, 2009. p. 289). Instead of being angry with the child, the parent might become offended and believe this behavior was done to hurt them. This degree of self focus can make a person believe that everything in life is out to get them.

According to Beck and Weishaar (2008) and Dattilio and Freeman(1992), a cognitive distortion that is very common in ANTs is that of labeling. In labeling, a person may base their identity on labels that have their roots in mistakes or experiences from the past (as cited by Corey, 2009. p. 289). A person with this distortion may have ANTs such as “ I am so stupid, I will never pass this class,” or “ I am so fat, why would anyone want to date me?” and others. This type of ANT is a definite contributor to negative self assessment.

The final cognitive distortion to discuss is called dichotomous thinking. According to Beck and Weishaar (2008) and Dattilio and Freeman(1992), in this pattern of thought, situations and people are polarized into a very clear, black and white schema. For example, things may be viewed as bad or good, smart or dumb, etc.( as cited by Corey, 2009. p. 289). This kind of thinking does not allow for any compromise between the two constructs. An example of this would be a person believing that failure to acquire a job they applied for means that they are a worthless and unemployable, instead of taking into consideration the job market and the position requirements.

Each of these thought patterns results in viewing the world in a different way, usually one that is not true and has no factual basis. If a person has one or more cognitive distortions included in the way they think and process information, ANTs are inevitable. Individuals with uncontrolled ANTs may experience low levels of self esteem, depression and many other detrimental symptoms (Ingram et al, 1990. p. 300.). People who experience depression are sometimes led to suicide, and people who struggle with anxiety can often become reclusive and not have the chance to live life fully.

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Since automatic negative thoughts are a cognitive issue dealing with self schema, the most commonly used therapy style to deal with them is Cognitive Behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT has been useful in working with clients to control and change their thought processes in a positive, self accepting way. One case study results seem to indicate that helping clients confront ANTs can be done through gathering data about the ANTs experienced, and then disputing the maladaptive thoughts while assisting clients in developing more healthy thought processes (Lam and Chen, 1998, p. 1144-1147). This challenges the client to question themselves on beliefs they may have held for years.

One technique discussed in the case study by Lam and Chen (1998, p. 1147), was Alternative Thinking. This was demonstrated when the researcher asked the subject if other people would think the same thoughts about him that he thinks about himself. Frequently the answer was no, others would not judge the subject as harshly as he judges himself. Confrontations such as this one seem to alert the client to the lack of factual basis to their self assessments (Lam and Chen, 1998, p. 1147).

In a study by Gortner, Gollan, Dobson and Jacobson to evaluate CBT as a treatment for depression, automatic thoughts (ANTs specifically) were one of the behaviors addressed (Gortner, E. T. , Gollan, J. K., Dobson, K. S., Jacobson, S. 1998, p. 377). Research participants did things such as recording their negative thoughts in a journal, evaluated the thoughts for validity and tested their beliefs against proven facts. CBT proved a valuable and helpful therapy style for dealing with the depression of study

participants and the amount of ANTs measured was also decreased (Gortner, <https://assignbuster.com/basis-and-confrontation-of-automatic-negative-thoughts/>

Gollan, Dobson and Jacobson, 1998, p. 378). According to Owen Lightsey (Lightsey, 1994, p. 353), increased levels positive thoughts may reduce the effects or incidences of negative thoughts. Lightsey stated that “ positive cognitions may serve as stress-buffers”(Lightsey, 1994, p. 353) that can lead to a decrease in negative thoughts.

In conclusion, automatic negative thoughts have shown a strong link with depression, anxiety and other emotional and health issues. They are inarguably a source of pain and frustration for anyone experiencing them, and researchers and therapists have taken steps to help by developed methods of addressing them. Pointing out the lack of factual basis seems to be a way of dealing with ANTs that several techniques have in common.