How to Break Free from 12 Dysfunctional Thought Patterns
...and a handy chart to help you track your progress

A Special Report from Dr. Audrey Sherman, author of
Dysfunction Interrupted:
How to Quickly Overcome Depression, Anxiety and Anger, Starting Now
http://www.PsychSkills.com

By Dr. Audrey Sherman

It's the little voice inside your head that insists you're no good—over and over again.

It's a dysfunctional thought pattern that has you in its grip. And it's making you miserable.

I've identified the "Dirty Dozen" dysfunctional thought patterns—certain ways of thinking—that many people have picked up along the way. You might have four or five favorites. We're all guilty of using these at one time or another. But that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with your brain.

All it means is that it's time to break free. Finally. Starting today.

How?

By replacing damaging thoughts with more productive ones that will make you feel better emotionally. Your body will like them too. If you can control your thoughts and emotions, you can lower your blood pressure, keep from overeating, reduce the risk of stroke and maybe even live longer.

The key lies in learning to dispute these destructive thoughts. This doesn’t mean sugarcoating things or living in denial, but using your mind to logically
and rationally examine what you are thinking and whether it makes sense in
the moment.

Studies show that learning to argue against your thoughts relieves
depression and is more effective than antidepressant medication! Once
learned, it cannot be unlearned. The technique discourages future relapses.
You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Once you know the 12 Dysfunctional Thought Patterns, you can track
their frequency using the chart at the end of this report. I'll show you
how to break free.

**The 12 Dysfunctional Thought Patterns**

1. **Things are one way or the other. There's no middle ground.**

   This is also known as black and white thinking. "I blew my diet with that ice
   cream. I may as well eat everything else in sight." Or "all people of different
   religions are scary."

   This doesn’t allow for negotiation in a relationship or in life. It chips away at
   your happiness. If your absolute belief is negative, it causes anger,
   depression and resulting bad behavior.

2. **Extension**

   One negative event carries over to all other events like it.

   “I failed that test. I will always fail tests. I'm no good at tests.” Is this true?
   Have you ever passed a test?

   “My partner left me. No one will ever love me.” Do you have solid evidence?

3. **The Black Filter**

   You dwell on negative aspects of otherwise good situations.

   For example, you have dinner in a nice restaurant. The food and service were
   outstanding. Yet you're only focused on the fact that your cab was 15
   minutes late. You let it bother you and spoil the rest of the evening. It will
even spoil tomorrow because in the morning, you're going to call the cab company and complain about the driver.

4. Not Recognizing Your Worth

You ignore your best character traits and the reasons why other people like you. Maybe you’re uncomfortable receiving compliments. By not acknowledging the good things about your personality, you cheat yourself out of the "warm and fuzzy" feelings. You also can’t build upon your strengths if you don’t recognize and use them.

Think about what compliments you've received recently and how they made you feel. Pretty good stuff!

5. Mind-reading

You talk to someone, or maybe you just look at them, and you're convinced you know what they're thinking. Someone might smile at you at work. But you interpret it as a look of pity, and you think you're about to get fired. A co-worker doesn’t smile at you and you conclude she's angry at you. These thoughts eat away at you all day.

6. Predicting the Future

You have a mental “crystal ball” and not only predict that things will be terrible but you convince yourself that they are. For example, you hear it's going to snow tomorrow, the day of your dentist appointment. You envision a 10-car pileup with injuries and even death. You panic and cancel the appointment.

7. Catastrophizing

You think the absolute worst and blow things all out of proportion. Spilling a glass of milk isn't the end of the world. The end of a relationship isn't either. It might hurt, but it isn't a disaster.

8. Denial

You minimize problems in an unrealistic way. You say things like, “He only drinks when he’s stressed” instead of admitting he's an alcoholic. When
you're unrealistic, you can't deal with what's in front of you. Your emotions are confused. They leave you feeling disoriented.

9. Emotional Override

You allow your emotions in the moment to dictate your thoughts. “I missed that golf shot. I'm a terrible golfer. I'm a loser.” That same dysfunctional thought pattern carries over into other aspects of your life.

10. Judging Yourself and Others

You view the world based on your own value system and what you expect of others. You use words like "I should" or "he should." The word "should" suggests someone is lacking in what "should be." If you judge yourself, you can't develop reasonable expectations to build a good life. "I should always be perfect" invites misery.

11. Mental Bullying

Telling yourself "I'm fat" or "I'm a loser" or "OK, stupid" is painful and debilitating. If you want to ruin your day, wake up and insult yourself the first thing in the morning.

12. Finger Pointing

Blaming others for your problems can be the easy way out. But it lets you shirk responsibility. Stuck in a bad relationship? Look in the mirror and ask why you're still with him.

The flip side of finger pointing is blaming yourself for things you're not responsible for. A woman who's abused often blames herself for the big fight. Why? Because her husband blames her, and arguing with him would only make it worse.

How to Break Free

To break free from these destructive thoughts you must ask yourself 4 questions every time you start to feel sad, mad or anxious. Chances are you're engaging in one of the dysfunctional thought patterns.
**Question #1**— What just happened?

**Question #2** — What was my first thought?

**Question #3** — How do I feel right now?

**Question #4** — Is it reality?

Here are two real life examples of how this process works to make you feel better.

**Example 1**— You do poorly on a test.

- **Question 1**— What happened? I failed a test.
- **Question 2**— What was my first thought? I am stupid. I won’t get into a new job, school, whatever. I will be caught up in a menial job my whole life. (Mental Name Calling, Predicting the Future)
- **Question 3** — How do I feel right now? I feel sad, depressed and hate myself for being stupid. I’m not even going to try again. I think I’ll pig out or get drunk. I feel as if my future is now very limited.
- **Question 4**— Is it reality? No, I guess I passed enough tests in the first place to get where I am. I actually have no proof of low intelligence. The reality is I let my social life or my family distract me from studying, and I wasn’t as prepared as I could have been. One bad score isn’t going to result in a ruined future. I’m not going to let this happen again.

The feelings of stupidity and failure have been negated by the actual circumstances. You’re still not happy to have failed a test, but you haven’t given up altogether and gone down a destructive mental path. You see the solution, and it gives you hope for next time.

**Example 2** — You’re standing in line and the man in front of you steps on your foot.

- **Question 1**— What happened? A man stepped on my foot.
• **Question 2** — What was my first thought? He did it on purpose. He's a jerk and thinks only about himself. All people are jerks for that matter. (Mind Reading and Extension)

• **Question 3** — How do I feel right now? I feel angry, I want to shove the guy into next year. I really hate people. I'm disappointed in the human race. I'm going to think now of all the things I should have said to him when he did it.

• **Question 4** — Is this reality? I really don't know if he did it on purpose. I have no evidence to suggest this. He just backed up and stepped on my foot. The person in front of him could have bumped him. He may have lost his balance for some reason.

I feel better and the anger is dissipating. I really don't care anymore about the guy and won't give it anymore thought. I'll go on with my evening and have a good time.

In these situations, it's relatively easy to argue with yourself. Some situations in life will be much tougher and you will have to examine the answers to your questions. But whether it's easy answer or a tough one, the process is the same and it provides the same successful thoughts and results.

You are already on the way to successful emotional thinking!

**Use This Handy Chart to Track Your Progress**

Use the chart on the last page of this report to keep track of your dysfunctional thought patterns for one week.

Each time you start feeling anxious, mad or sad, ask yourself the four important questions at the top of the chart. Your answers will help you identify the dysfunctional thought pattern on the left. When you've identified it, put a checkmark in the box under the corresponding day of the week.

If you don't have time to answer all four questions, that's OK. Just identify which thought pattern you think it is, and return to the chart later to answer the questions. As you get better at this, the process will go quickly.
By the end of the week, you'll be able to see which patterns are your favorites. These are the culprits making you unhappy or keeping you stuck. Challenge them by talking back! You'll keep calm and feel better.

Print another version of the chart when you want to go through the exercise again.

It doesn’t matter how you developed these thought patterns. It's more important to identify them, remove them, and start enjoying a better life.

Visit my blog for more tips on breaking free from unhealthy living:
http://PsychSkills.com/blog/

Let's connect on LinkedIn:
https://www.linkedin.com/pub/audrey-sherman-ph-d/53/710/974

PsychSkills Institute Inc.
12641 World Plaza Lane #56
Fort Myers, FL 33907
Email: mailto:Info@PsychSkills.com
Phone: 239-292-2451
How I'm Thinking This Week

1. What just happened?
2. What was my first thought?
3. How do I feel right now?
4. Is it reality?

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