

- Thought and thinking

## HOW TO OVERCOME NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

A new book by a mental health educator shares a simple four-step method to break free from stress and unlock unshakeable inner strength

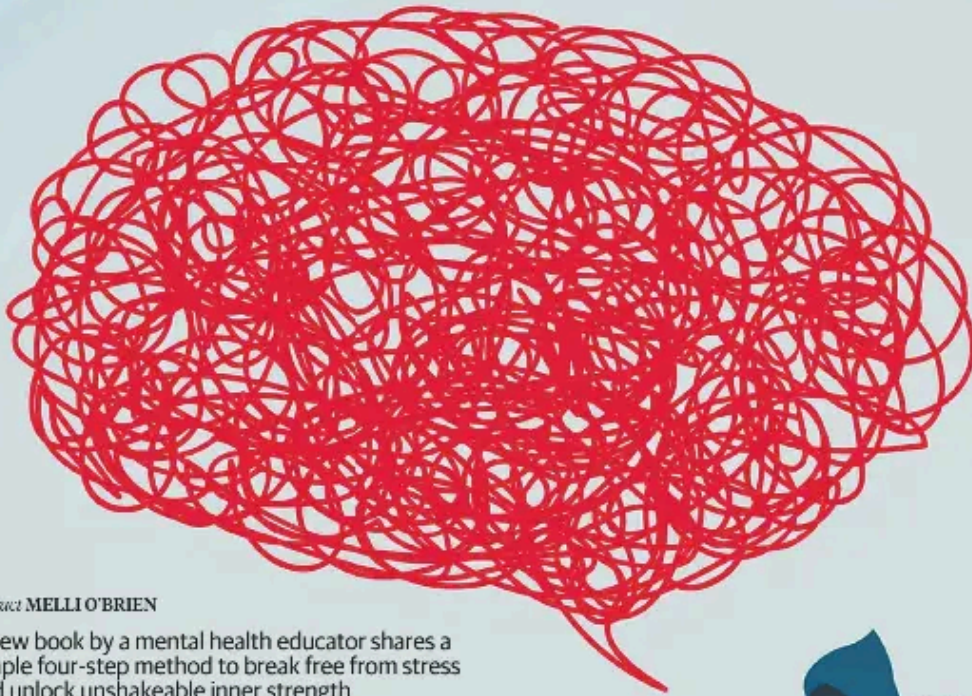
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Have you ever tried to stop thinking negatively, only to find that the more you push away the thoughts, the stronger they become? This is known as the White Bear Effect, a psychological phenomenon first demonstrated by researcher Daniel Wegner. In his study, participants were asked to avoid thinking about a white bear – but ironically, the thought became even more persistent. This experiment reveals an important truth: the more we try to force negative thoughts away, the more power they gain.

# NEGATIVE THOUGHTS



Extract MELLI O'BRIEN

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This experiment reveals an important truth: the more we try to force negative thoughts away, the more power they gain.

Instead of trying to eliminate them, the key is to change our relationship to them – learning to acknowledge them without being “hooked” by them. Psychological research shows that trying to suppress negative thoughts doesn't work, but there are proven strategies that do.

Below are three evidence-based techniques that will help you shift your thinking patterns, cultivate a more flexible, helpful and resilient mindset and become more mentally strong.

## 1 UNHOOK FROM YOUR UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

Often, we assume that our thoughts are facts – but in reality, they are just mental events. Bits of sound moving through our mind. When we become “hooked” on a thought (e.g. “I'm not good enough” or “Everything will go wrong”), it can exert a heavy influence over us and

dominate our mood, perspective and behaviours. A technique called thought defusion helps us create mental distance from our thoughts so they lose their grip on us. Studies show that labelling your thoughts and emotions helps reduce emotional distress and increase self-awareness.

### How to practise defusion

When a negative thought arises, say to yourself: “Just a thought.” This act of directly acknowledging the thought creates space between you and the thought, making it feel less personal and less powerful.

Let the thought be there. Don't try to get rid of it. Instead just recognise it for what it is – just words in your mind.

Imagine placing it on a leaf and watching it float down a stream till it naturally fades. Each time it returns you can repeat the process.

By practising defusion like this, you learn to observe your thoughts instead of being thrown around by them.

## 2 REDIRECTION: SHIFT YOUR MENTAL FOCUS USING QUESTIONS

When we get caught in negative thinking, our mind tends to loop through the same thoughts, reinforcing stress, anxiety and self doubt. One of the most powerful ways to break this cycle is by redirecting your attention with empowering questions. Our minds are wired to seek answers – so when you ask yourself a different question,



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you naturally shift your focus toward something more helpful.

#### How to practise redirection

When you catch yourself caught in negative tailspin, pause, take a deep breath and then ask yourself an empowering question like: What is one small thing I can do right now to improve this situation? What would I say to a friend going through this? How can I approach this situation in a more helpful or empowering way? How can I learn and grow from this? What am I grateful for today?

Instead of trying to stop the negative thought, give your mind a different task. Redirect it toward problem-solving, learning, perspective-taking or gratitude. By changing the mental question you’re asking, you interrupt the negative cycle and create space for a more balanced, empowered perspective.

#### 3 SELF-COMPASSION: CHANGE HOW YOU TALK TO YOURSELF

Many of us speak to ourselves in ways we’d never speak to a friend. When something goes wrong, our inner critic might say, “You always mess up” or “You’re not good enough.”

Research shows that self-criticism increases stress, while self-compassion helps build resilience and emotional balance.

#### How to practise self-compassion

1 Notice your inner dialogue: Pay attention to how you talk to yourself, especially in moments of struggle. Are your thoughts filled with harsh self-judgment or criticism?

2 Shift to a kinder perspective: Imagine a close friend was in your situation. What would you say to them? How would you offer them support? Now, turn that same kindness toward yourself.

3 Use a self-compassion statement: Speak to yourself with warmth and encouragement. Try saying to yourself mentally: “This is hard right now, but I am doing my best.” “It’s okay to be imperfect – I’m human, just like everyone else.” “I deserve the same kindness I would give to others.”

Negative thoughts are a normal part of being human, but they don’t have to dictate your life. Instead of trying to eliminate them, you can change how you respond to them.

By practising diffusion, redirecting your attention, and cultivating self-compassion, you create the conditions for greater inner peace and resilience so you can live a more happy, balanced and meaningful life.

The next time a negative thought arises, try labelling it, shifting your focus, or responding with kindness – and notice how your relationship with your mind begins to change.

#### HOW TO DEAL WITH BAD MENTAL HEALTH ADVICE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

We live in a time where mental health advice is everywhere. A few swipes on Instagram or TikTok, and you’re met with endless posts telling you how to heal, how to be happy, and how to “fix” yourself.

Some of it is deeply insightful. Some of it is well-meaning but overly simplistic. And some of it? Downright harmful.

With mental health awareness growing, more people are sharing their experiences – which is a beautiful thing. But with this rise comes a problem: not all advice is good advice.

What works for one person might not work for another. And sometimes, advice that seems helpful on the surface can actually make things worse.

So how do you navigate mental health advice online in a way that empowers, rather than harms, your wellbeing?

Here are four things to keep in mind.

1 Beware of one-size-fits-all advice: Mental healing is not a single formula that fits every person. But on social media, you’ll often see posts that make it seem that way: “Just think positive, and you’ll be happy.” “Cut out all negative people, and your mental health will improve.” “If you’re still struggling, you’re just not trying hard enough.”

While these messages might have a small grain of truth, they oversimplify complex issues. True healing is more nuanced than that – it involves learning the skills of emotional intelligence, self-regulation and self-awareness, and the ability to respond to life with wisdom.

Be wary of advice that dismisses the deeper work required for real lasting change.

Mental health ‘hacks’ aren’t a substitute for professional support

Trendy mental health tips, like breathwork techniques or morning routines, can be great tools – but they are not solutions for deep-seated struggles. While a five-second rule or an ice bath might boost your mood, they won’t address unresolved trauma, transform self-worth struggles or be the whole answer for your ongoing depression or anxiety.

If you’re facing serious challenges, mental health isn’t a good DIY project. It’s likely going to yield much better results to reach out to a trained therapist, coach, or someone with real expertise in the mental health field. Don’t let social media convince you that all healing can be done through viral trends.

3 Watch out for toxic positivity: Social media loves a feel-good message. And while there’s nothing wrong with optimism, toxic positivity can be harmful. You’ll see messages like: “Just be grateful – others have it worse.” “Don’t focus on the negative – only good vibes!” “Your struggles are just a mindset problem.”

But here's the truth: Real mental wellbeing isn't about thinking nice thoughts or avoiding (or hiding) painful emotions. It's about learning to regulate thoughts and emotions with mindfulness, compassion and mental flexibility.

Instead of suppressing your struggles, true inner strength comes from acknowledging them, working through them, and choosing helpful new ways of thinking and adapting that support your growth, wellbeing and happiness. 4 Trust your inner wisdom: No social media post – no matter how many likes it has – knows you better than you do. If something doesn't sit right with you, listen to that feeling.

Mental health advice should empower you, not make you feel guilty, ashamed, or like you're failing if a certain technique doesn't work. Also be aware of the expertise of the person giving advice. Just because someone has a lot of followers it doesn't mean what they are saying is ultimately going to be helpful for you.

The takeaway

Discernment is key. The internet is full of well-meaning voices, but not all voices are wise voices. Learning to filter through mental health advice with discernment is a skill – one that will protect your wellbeing and keep you on a path that's truly supportive.