

Changing Automatic Thoughts Using a Coping Mantra

Objective

To replace negative automatic thoughts with a coping mantra.

You Should Know

What you think influences how you feel. Repetitive thoughts like, “I am a bad parent,” “I never seem to catch a break,” or “I always fail,” are negative automatic thoughts (ATs). ATs are spontaneous thoughts that pop into your mind when you are feeling upset or facing challenges.

ATs are often unkind, judgmental, and critical toward the self, and they often reflect core beliefs about yourself and the world. Coping thoughts, by comparison, are personalized, strength-based declarations about your resiliency that shifts your attention and helps you cope with difficult emotions. Coping thoughts can help you think and feel differently about a triggering or upsetting situation.

You can create a specific coping thought to use when you are upset; a *coping mantra* refers to a phrase you can repeat over and over whenever an unpleasant emotion or thought surfaces. Mantras are helpful because they focus the mind by providing counter-narratives to automatic thoughts. It is important that you believe the coping mantra to be true and realistic – otherwise, it will probably not be effective. If you are really upset, you might not remember your coping mantra, so it is helpful to write it down so you can access it easily when you need it the most. You might write it on a small card you keep in your wallet, or store it on your mobile phone.

Focused repetition of a coping mantra is called autogenic training, and with practice it can help you relax, calm down, and change your thoughts. One study found that autogenic training significantly reduced anxiety and depression symptoms among participants.

It is best to develop your own mantra. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- 1. This too shall pass.** This reminds you that everything is passing, even unpleasant emotions, thoughts, and situations that feel permanent.
- 2. Just for today.** By reminding yourself you only have to give this day your best shot—or maybe even the next 15 minutes—you can more easily remain present and avoid worrying about next week or a month from now.
- 3. I will get better.**
- 4. I am breathing in, I am breathing out.** When you concentrate on your breath, you generate peacefulness and calm.
- 5. Let it go.**
- 6. I am safe.**
- 7. I am...** You might say, “I am enough,” “I am patient,” or, “I am at peace.” Very short one-line affirmations repeated slowly are soothing.
- 8. It’s not about me.** This mantra helps when you are upset about a situation that involves

other people.

9. All is well. Sometimes you just need a reminder that things are going to be OK.

10. Thank you. Acknowledge the good things in your life by repeating “thank you.” Directing your thoughts toward gratitude is grounding.

11. Calm down. Sometimes telling someone to “calm down” is ineffective, but repeating it to yourself while breathing deeply to counts of four to C-A-L-M [*on the in breath*] and D-O-W-N [*on the out breath*] is helpful.

12. I am lovable. This is helpful if you experience conflict with a loved one.

This worksheet is designed to help you create your own coping mantra in order to change your negative automatic thoughts.

What to Do

Take a moment to think about one helpful thought that can become your coping mantra. Your coping mantra is highly personal and meaningful, a phrase you can call upon at any time you need to. Write down your coping mantra in the space below:

How much do you believe this coping mantra to be true on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 = completely untrue, and 10 = completely true? _____

Think about a recent situation that was unpleasant or upsetting. Write down the negative automatic thoughts you had.

Do you think you could have changed your negative ATs if you used your coping mantra? Why or why not?

After practicing using your coping mantra for one week, how much do you believe it to be true on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 = completely untrue, and 10 = completely true? _____

Reflections on This Exercise

Was there anything that surprised you during this exercise?

What did you find challenging about this exercise?

What did you find most helpful?

What can you do to remember your mantra when you are faced with upsetting or stressful situations?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
