

A photograph of a woman with long dark hair, smiling and writing in a notebook. She is wearing a red top and a necklace. The background is a light blue gradient.

THE  
**verywell  
mind  
podcast**

WITH THERAPIST  
**Amy Morin**

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## 156 - Friday Fix: How to Respond to Unhelpful Thoughts

Welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!* I'm Amy Morin, editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength.

You're listening to The Friday Fix. Every Friday, I share a quick mental strength strategy that can help fix the thoughts, feelings, and actions that can hold you back in life.

And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys.

Now, let's dive into today's episode!

Today I'm talking about how to deal with unhelpful thoughts.

So often, people say they need help dealing with negative thoughts. But, not all negative thoughts are bad or inaccurate.

Sometimes, things really are that bad. Maybe your boss just delivered some bad news about the future of the company. Your thoughts about the chances of becoming unemployed might be accurate.

That's why I'm talking about unhelpful thoughts and not just negative thoughts.

The negative thoughts that are true aren't necessarily harmful. It's the irrational, untrue thoughts that aren't helpful.

There may be times when you exaggerate how bad things are, like when you're thinking everyone is upset with you about something. In reality, one person might be mad. Or you might just be imagining that everyone is upset because of a choice you made—like moving to a new city.

In those instances, your negative thoughts are likely unfounded.

Similarly, you might be predicting catastrophic things for the future. When your boss sends you an email that says, “Let’s find a time to meet today,” you might start thinking that your boss is upset, you’re going to get fired, and without a job, you’re going to be homeless.

Going down that trail of negative thinking also isn’t helpful because you are just making up an ending to a story that isn’t based on reality. You don’t even know why your boss wants to meet yet and your imagination is running wild.

Clearly, those thoughts will influence your feelings and your behavior, if you let them. But they don’t have to take over. You have choices in how you respond to your thoughts.

In the therapy office, we call those initial thoughts that pop into your head “automatic thoughts.” You don’t have a lot of control over them. But you do have control over how you respond to them.

Let’s take that email from the boss again. One person who reads the email that just says, ‘We need to find a time to meet today,’ might think, “My boss hates me. I’m probably going to get fired.”.

Another person, who gets that email might think, “My boss loves me. I’m probably going to get promoted.” Same circumstance. Just two very different automatic thoughts. That’s not to say that one is definitely better than the other. Unrealistic thoughts—whether they’re overly negative or overly positive—are’t helpful. But sometimes people mistakenly assume that positive thinking is always a good thing. Research shows otherwise, however.

Let’s take students, for example. In one study, they asked nursing students how they thought they were going to do on an upcoming test. Some students expressed some concern about how they thought they were going to do. Other students were completely confident they would ace the test.

Guess who did better?

The students who had some concerns about how they were going to do actually scored higher than the students who were confident they would get a good grade.

Researchers found that the students who were overly optimistic about how well they would score put in less time and effort studying for the exam.

Clearly, overly positive thoughts can be just as detrimental as overly negative thoughts. So when I talk about unhelpful thoughts, I'm referring to both the overly negative thoughts as well as the overly positive thoughts.

Fortunately, you don't have to believe everything you think. In fact, it's safe to say many of the things that run through your head aren't accurate. You're looking at the world through a specific filter that causes you to interpret events in a certain way.

Your emotions are a big influence on that filter.

Let's say you're already feeling anxious about something—like you're anxiously awaiting a call to hear news from a doctor about your loved one's health tests. If you get that email from your boss that says, "Let's meet today," you're much more likely to think it's about something bad because your emotions affect your judgment.

Similarly, if you're feeling sad and you send a text message to a friend who doesn't respond, you are more likely to think that person doesn't like you. If you feel happy when you send that message, you might be more likely to think the other person is just too busy to respond right now.

Our life experiences also affect our automatic thoughts. You developed beliefs about yourself, other people, and the world around you when you were a child. And you will constantly look for evidence that reinforces the things you already know to be true.

So someone who developed a belief that they aren't good enough, may be more likely to have automatic thoughts that other people don't like them or that they're going to be rejected as compared to someone who believes they're worthy.

We also tend to overlook evidence that goes against our beliefs. So if you believe you're not good enough and yet you achieve something really big, you'll most likely chalk it up to luck or you'll convince yourself that the people around you have just been fooled into thinking you're worthwhile.

Our beliefs greatly affect that filter of how we see the world and they are a driving force behind those automatic thoughts that pop into our minds.

Mental health issues also affect automatic thoughts. Individuals who have depression are more likely to have automatic thoughts that fuel a sense of hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness.

Individuals with anxiety disorders are more likely to have automatic thoughts that overestimate the risk or consequences they face and underestimate their capacity to cope.

So it can be helpful sometimes to step back and recognize that most of the thoughts you have aren't true.

Spend some time thinking about what sort of filter affects your automatic thoughts. What emotions and underlying beliefs cause you to see the world in a certain way?

You choose how to respond to unhelpful thoughts.

There are lots of strategies for how you can reframe those thoughts by responding to them with more realistic statements.

One tactic involves turning BLUE thoughts into true thoughts. This is a strategy we discussed way back in episode 28. Essentially, it's about recognizing unhelpful thoughts, like, "I'm going to embarrass myself," and responding to them with more helpful thoughts like, "I'm going to get up there and do my best."

Another strategy for dealing with unhelpful thoughts involves talking to yourself the same way you'd talk to a friend. We've discussed this strategy many times. It involves just asking yourself, "What would I say to my friend right now?" and then giving yourself those same kind words. Speaking to yourself with self-compassion goes a long way toward helping you build mental strength.

When you have repetitive thoughts or you're stuck in a pattern of unhelpful thinking, you can change the channel in your brain. That's something we talked about in episode 30. It involves distracting your brain for a few minutes with an activity so you can stop thinking about something that's upsetting and feel better.

I've worked with other people who imagine a STOP sign in their brains when they're thoughts are headed down an unhelpful path or when they're caught in a loop of catastrophic thoughts. I've also worked with people who develop a mantra to drown out unhelpful thoughts, something we discussed in episode 119. You might repeat a phrase to yourself, like "Not helpful" every time you notice your thoughts aren't productive.

So those are just a few things you can do to deal with unhelpful thoughts—remember that most of what you think isn't true, consider the things that cause you to filter your circumstances in a specific way (your emotions and your life experiences), and experiment with strategies that help you respond to unhelpful thoughts in a healthy way (like talking to yourself like a trusted friend or changing the channel in your brain).

Your brain is programmed to look for the negative. That strategy worked well when we were living in primitive times and we had to constantly be on the lookout for danger so we didn't get eaten by a hungry predator. But, your brain doesn't need to do that in

modern times. So it's important to respond to those automatic thoughts that aren't helpful in a healthy way.

If you're struggling to cope with unhelpful thoughts that keep running through your head, see a therapist if you can. A therapist can help you identify strategies that can help. Keep in mind that certain mental illnesses can make it difficult to manage unhelpful thoughts. Mental health professionals can help you discover what will work for you.

If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share it with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger. Do you want free access to my online course? It's called "10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential." To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is [podcast@verywell.com](mailto:podcast@verywell.com) We'll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and listening to *The Verywell Mind Podcast*.

And as always, a big thank you to my show's producer (who thinks I don't talk loud enough), Nick Valentin.