



7 Mindfulness Ways to Manage Negative Thoughts and Emotions

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As a coach and mentor, I often hear from my clients, "I wish I could control my mind," wanting to stop [negative thinking](#) or feeling. Yet, this perspective can often increase frustration, [anxiety](#) or even [depression](#), and make things worse.

The truth of the matter is that you can't completely control either. And trying not to think of something, called the "Ironic Process Theory," or trying to suppress thoughts can make them more likely to reoccur.

In the book, *The Happiness Trap*, author Russ Harris says 80% of our thoughts contain negative content. In her book, *The Happiness Track*, Emma Seppälä explained why negative thoughts come into our minds as a process by which our [brain's](#) habit of being negative as a protective and defensive process. As a result, she says, "We have such a strong propensity to favor negativity that we have a skewed vision of reality."

[A study](#) of more than 30,000 people in the U.K. revealed that focusing on negative life events can be the prime predictor of some of today's most common [health](#) problems. Results from this large study indicated that it isn't just a matter of life events, but how we react to those events that shapes our psychological well-being.

If we accept that you can't control your thoughts or feelings, but rather focus on cultivating your awareness of them, and regulate their impact, without getting caught up with them, then life can be far less stressful. The important thing is to realize that the content of our thoughts and emotions is less important than how we let them affect us.

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In fact, [research shows](#) that when people are instructed not to think about a specific thing, it makes it more difficult to get that thing out of their minds. But revisiting negative thoughts repeatedly, also known as rumination, can be unpleasant and counterproductive. In some cases, it can lead to extreme anxiety or chronic depression. "It's like a needle in a groove," says Guy Winch, Ph.D., psychologist and author of *Emotional First Aid: Practical Strategies for Treating Failure, Rejection, Guilt and Other Everyday Psychological Injuries*. "As the groove gets deeper and deeper, the needle has a harder time getting out of the groove."

This is where [mindfulness](#) comes in. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, a [leader](#) in mindfulness practices, can be defined as "paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally." In other words, mindfulness allows us to become more aware of our thoughts without labeling or judging them.

A review of [mindfulness research](#) found that mindfulness-based [cognitive](#) behavioral interventions are effective in the reduction of both rumination and worry. The researchers conclude, "more broadly, it appears that treatments in which the participants are encouraged to change their thinking style, or to disengage from emotional responses to rumination and/or worry, could be helpful."

[Researchers Rimma Teper and her colleagues](#) at the University of Toronto found that despite the misconception that [meditation](#) "empties the mind of emotions," mindfulness actually "helps us become more aware and accepting of emotional signals which helps us control our behavior." Norman Farb and colleagues found mindfulness interventions promoted increased tolerance of negative emotions and improved well-being.

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R. Chambers and colleagues concluded, based on an integrative review, that mindful emotion regulation “does not entail suppression of the emotional experience...but involves a systematic retraining of awareness and non-reactivity, leading to defusion from whatever is experienced and allowing the individual to more consciously choose those thoughts, emotional and sensations they will identify with, rather than habitually reacting to them.”



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So here are 7 mindfulness strategies that can be effective in managing negative thoughts and emotions:

1. Turn towards, and not away from your negative thoughts or emotions with acceptance. Once you are aware of the negative thought or emotion, notice where you felt it in your body, and what emotion arises with the physical feeling. Just sit with the emotion (eg: anxiety, [fear](#), [anger](#), guilt) and don't ignore it or try to block it or push it away. Become the observer of your experience.
2. Identify and label the thought or emotion you are feeling. This involves two parts. The first is correctly labelling it, and the second is how you express it. Using language of that of an observer, is more powerful than personalizing it. For example, saying, "Oh, this is fear arising in me right now," is preferable to "I am afraid."
3. See your thought or emotion as being temporary or transitory. They will pass unless you want to hold onto them and get some kind of reward for doing so. Seeing the thought or emotion as a cloud floating by or asking yourself repeatedly, "What is this thought/emotion now?" helps.
4. Let go of the need to control your thoughts or emotions. Emotional regulation is not the same as stifling, blocking or avoiding thoughts and emotions in an effort to maintain control. Again, having a healthy detachment is being mindful.
5. Learn how to recognize cognitive distortions; in other words, recognizing the thought processes that distort reality. Examples of cognitive distortions are [confirmation bias](#), catastrophizing, personalization, control fallacy, blaming, and the dreaded "tyranny of shoulds." Being knowledgeable about these distortions and if you are in the moment being a victim of them, is practicing mindfulness. Of course, taking appropriate action thereafter, is critical.

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6. Have a daily or weekly regime for negative thought or emotion time. This is giving yourself permission to temporarily think or feel the negative thought or emotion, but stick to a reasonable short time limit. And writing them down also helps.
7. Remember to breathe, pause and deliberately respond rather than react. When negative thoughts or emotions occur, we can either excessively ruminate over them, or react impulsively. Mindfulness teaches us to focus on our breathing, pause and wait until we've practiced the strategies, and then intentionally respond with appropriate action.

Source: Ray Williams

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