

ANT THERAPY

*How to Develop Your Own
Internal Anteater to
Eradicate Automatic
Negative Thoughts (ANTs)*



Daniel G. Amen, MD

Introduction

Our overall mind state has a certain tone or flavor based largely on the types of thoughts we think. When the deep limbic system is overactive, it sets the mind's filter on "negative." If you could look into the thoughts of people who are depressed, you would find one dispiriting thought following another. When they look at the past, there is regret. When they look at the future there is anxiety and pessimism. In the present moment, something is most often unsatisfactory. The lens through which they see themselves, others, and the world has a dim grayness to it. They are suffering from Automatic Negative Thoughts, or ANTs. ANTs are cynical, gloomy, and complaining thoughts that just seem to keep coming all by themselves.

ANTs can cause people to be depressed and fatalistic, which have a profound impact on their lives. "I know I won't pass that test on Tuesday." This kind of thinking makes for a self-fulfilling prophecy: if they've already convinced themselves they won't pass, they won't study very hard and they won't pass the test. This type of thinking severely limits a person's ability to enjoy his or her life because how one thinks on a moment-to-moment basis plays a large role in how one feels and how one conducts one's affairs. If you are depressed all the time, you don't expect good things to happen so you don't try very hard to make them happen. The internal distress from melancholy thinking can make you behave in ways that alienate others, thus causing you to isolate yourself further. On the other hand, positive thoughts and a positive attitude will help you radiate a sense of well being, making it easier for others to connect with you. Positive thoughts will also help you be more effective in your life. So, as you can see, what goes on in your mind all day long can determine whether your behavior is self-defeating or self-promoting.

Here are some examples of typical ANTs (automatic negative thoughts):

"You never listen to me."

"Just because we had a good year in business doesn't mean anything."

"You don't like me."

"This situation is not going to work out. I know something bad will happen."

"I feel as though you don't care about me."

"I should have done much better. I'm a failure."

"You're arrogant."

"You're late because you don't care."

"It's your fault."

These thoughts severely limit a person's ability to enjoy his or her life. How you think "moment-by-moment" plays a large role in how you feel (a deep limbic system function). Negative thoughts cause you to feel internal discomfort or pain and they often cause you to behave in ways that alienate from other people. Hopeful thoughts, on the other hand, influence positive behaviors and lead people to feel good about themselves and be more effective in their day-to-day lives. Hopeful thoughts also are involved in helping people connect with others.

Healing the deep limbic system requires a person to heal their moment-to-moment thought patterns. Unfortunately, there is no formal place where we are taught to think much about our thoughts or to challenge the notions that go through our head, even though our thoughts are always with us. Most people do not understand how important thoughts are, and leave the development of thought patterns to random chance. Did you know that every thought you have sends electrical signals throughout your brain? Thoughts have actual physical properties. They are real! They have significant influence on every cell in your body. When your mind is burdened with many negative thoughts, it affects your deep limbic system and

causes deep limbic problems (irritability, moodiness, depression, etc.). Teaching yourself to control and direct thoughts in a positive way is one of the most effective ways to feel better.

Here are the actual step-by-step "thinking" principles that I use in my psychotherapy practice to help my patients heal their deep limbic systems.

STEP #1

Did you know...Every time you have a thought, your brain releases chemicals. That's how our brain works...

you have a thought,

your brain releases chemicals,

an electrical transmissions goes across your brain and

you become aware of what you're thinking.

Thoughts are real and they have a real impact on how you feel and how you behave.

STEP #2

Every time you have an angry thought, an unkind thought, a sad thought, or a cranky thought, your brain releases negative chemicals that make your body feel bad (and activate your deep limbic system). Think about the last time you were mad. How did your body feel? When most people are angry their muscles become tense, their hearts beat faster, their hands start to sweat and they may even begin to feel a little dizzy. Your body reacts to every negative thought you have.

Mark George, M.D., from the National Institutes of Mental Health, demonstrated this phenomena in an elegant study of brain function. He studied the activity of the brain in 10

normal women under three different conditions. He studied these women when they were thinking about happy thoughts, neutral thoughts and sad thoughts. During the happy thoughts, the women demonstrated a cooling of the deep limbic system. During the sad thoughts, he noticed a significant increase in deep limbic system activity. Powerful evidence that your thoughts matter!

STEP #3

Every time you have a good thought, a happy thought, a hopeful thought or a kind thought, your brain releases chemicals that make your body feel good (and cools your deep limbic system). Think about the last time you had a really happy thought. How did you feel inside your body? When most people are happy their muscles relax, their hearts beat slower, their hands become dry and they breathe slower. Your body also reacts to your good thoughts.

STEP #4

Your body reacts to every thought you have. We know this from polygraphs or lie detector tests. During a lie detector test, a person is hooked up to equipment that measures:

- hand temperature,
- heart rate,
- blood pressure,
- breathing rate,
- muscle tension and
- how much the hands sweat.

The tester then asks questions, like "Did you do that thing?" If the person did the bad

thing his body is likely to have a "stress" response and it is likely to react in the following ways:

hands get colder,

heart goes faster,

blood pressure goes up,

breathing gets faster,

muscles get tight and

hands sweat more.

Almost immediately, his body reacts to what he thinks, whether he says anything or not.

Remember, the deep limbic system is responsible for translating our emotional state into physical feelings of relaxation or tension. Now the opposite is also true. If he did not do the thing the tester asked about it is likely that his body will experience a "relaxation" response and react in the following ways:

hands will become warmer,

heart rate will slow,

blood pressure goes down,

breathing becomes slower and deeper,

muscles become more relaxed and

hands become drier.

Again, almost immediately, your body reacts to what you think. This not only happens when you're asked about telling the truth, your body reacts to every thought you have, whether it is about work, friends, family or anything else.

STEP #5

Thoughts are very powerful. They can make your mind and your body feel good or they can make you feel bad. Every cell in your body is affected by every thought you have. That is why when people get emotionally upset, they actually develop physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomach aches. Some physicians think that people who have a lot of negative thoughts are more likely to get cancer. If you can think about good things you will feel better.

Think of your body like an "ecosystem." An ecosystem contains everything in the environment like the water, the land, the cars, the people, the animals, the vegetation, the houses, the landfills, etc. A negative thought is like pollution to your system. Just as pollution in the Los Angeles Basin affects everyone who goes outside, so too do negative thoughts pollute your deep limbic system, your mind and your body.

STEP #6

Unless you think about your thoughts they are automatic or "they just happen." Since they just happen, they are not necessarily correct. Your thoughts do not always tell the truth. Sometimes they even lie to you. I once treated a college student who thought he was stupid, because he didn't do well on tests. When his IQ (intelligence level) was tested, however, we discovered that he was close to a genius! You don't have to believe every thought that goes through your head. It's important to think about your thoughts to see if they help you or they hurt you. Unfortunately, if you never challenge your thoughts you just "believe them" as if they were true.

STEP #7

You can train your thoughts to be positive and hopeful or you can just allow them to be negative and upset you. Once you learn about your thoughts, you can chose to think good thoughts and feel good or you can choose to think bad thoughts and feel lousy. That's right, it's up to you! You can learn how to change your thoughts and you can learn to change the way you feel.

One way to learn how to change your thoughts is to notice them when they are negative and talk back to them. If you can correct negative thoughts, you take away their power over you. When you just think a negative thought without challenging it, your mind believes it and your body reacts to it.

STEP #8

As I mentioned above, negative thoughts are mostly automatic or they "just happen." That is why I call these thoughts "Automatic Negative Thoughts" or ANTs. Think of these negative thoughts that invade your mind like ants that bother a couple at a picnic. One negative thought, like one ant at a picnic, is not a big problem. Two or three negative thoughts, like two or three ants at a picnic, becomes more irritating. Ten or twenty negative thoughts, like ten or twenty ants at a picnic, may cause the couple to pick up and leave the picnic. Whenever you notice these automatic negative thoughts or ANTs you need to crush them or they'll ruin your relationships, your self-esteem and your personal power. One way to crush these ANTs is to write them down and talk back to them. For example, if you think, "My husband never listens to me," write it down. Then write down a rational response; something like "He's not listening to me now, maybe he's distracted by something else. He often listens to me." When you write

down negative thoughts and talk back to them, you take away their power and help yourself feel better. Some people tell me they have trouble talking back to these negative thoughts because they feel that they are lying to themselves. Initially, they believe that the thoughts that go through their mind are the truth. Remember, thoughts sometimes lie to you. It's important to check them out before you just believe them!

Here are nine different ways that your thoughts lie to you to make situations out to be worse than they really are. Think of these nine ways as different species or types of ANTs (automatic negative thoughts). When you can identify the type of ANT, you begin to take away the power it has over you. I have designated some of these ANTs as red, because these ANTs are particularly harmful to you. Notice and exterminate ANTs whenever possible.

ANT #1: "Always or Never Thinking"

This happens when you think something that happened will "always" repeat itself. For example, if your partner is irritable and she gets upset you might think to yourself, "She's always yelling at me," even though she yells only once in a while. But just the thought "She's always yelling at me" is so negative that it makes you feel sad and upset. It activates your limbic system. Whenever you think in words like always, never, no one, every one, every time, everything those are examples of "always" thinking and usually wrong. Here are some examples of "always" thinking:

"He's always putting me down."

"No one will ever call me."

"I'll never get a raise."

"Everyone takes advantage of me."

"You turn away every time I touch you."

"My children never listen to me."

"Always thinking" ANTs are very common. Watch out for them.

ANT #2 (red ANT): "Focusing On the Negative"

This occurs when your thoughts only see the bad in a situation and ignore any of the good parts that might happen. For example, I have treated several professional speakers for depression. After their presentations they had the audience fill out an evaluation form. If 100 of them were returned and 2 of them were terrible, but 90 of them were outstanding, which ones do you think they focused on? Only the negative ones! I taught them to focus on the ones they liked a lot more than the ones they didn't like. It's important to learn from others, but in a balanced, positive way.

Your deep limbic system can learn a powerful lesson from the Disney movie, "Pollyanna." In the movie, Pollyanna came to live with her aunt after her missionary parents died. Even though she had lost her parents she was able to help many "negative people" with her attitude. She introduced them to the "glad game," to look for things to be glad about in any situation. Her father had taught her this game after she experienced a disappointment. She had always wanted a doll, but her parents never had enough money to buy it for her. Her father sent a request for a second hand doll to his missionary sponsors. By mistake, they sent her a pair of crutches. "What is there to be glad about crutches?" they thought. Then they decided they could be glad because they didn't have to use them. This very simple game changed the attitudes and lives of many people in the movie. Pollyanna especially affected the minister. Before she came to town he preached hellfire and damnation, and he did not seem to be very happy. Pollyanna

told him that her father said that the Bible had 800 "Glad Passages," and that if God mentioned being glad that many times, it must be because He wants us to think that way. Focusing on the negative in situations will make you feel bad. Playing the glad game, or looking for the positive will help you feel better.

ANT #3 (red ANT): "Fortune Telling"

This is where you predict the worst possible outcome to a situation. For example, before you discuss an important issue with your partner you predict that he or she won't be interested in what you have to say. Just having this thought will make you feel tense. I call "fortune telling" red ANTs because when you predict bad things you can make them happen. Say you are driving home from work and you predict that the house will be a wreck and no one will be interested in seeing you. By the time you get home you're waiting for a fight. When you see one thing out of place or no one comes running to the door you explode and ruin the rest of the evening. Fortune telling ANTs really hurt your chances for feeling good.

ANT #4 (red ANT): "Mind Reading"

This happens when you believe that you know what another person is thinking even when they haven't told you. Mind reading is a common cause of trouble between people. I tell my wife, "Please don't read my mind, I have enough trouble reading it myself!" You know that you are mind reading when you have thoughts such as, "She's mad at me. He doesn't like me. They were talking about me." I tell people that a negative look from someone else may be nothing more than they are constipated! You don't know. You can't read anyone else's mind. You never know what others are really thinking. Even in intimate relationships, you cannot read your

partner's mind. When there are things you don't understand, clarify them and stay away from mind reading ANTs. They are very infectious.

ANT #5: "Thinking With Your Feelings"

This occurs when you believe your negative feelings without ever questioning them. Feelings are very complex, and, often based on powerful memories from the past. Feelings sometimes lie to you. Feelings are not about truth. They are about feelings. But many people believe their feelings even though they have no evidence for them. "Thinking with your feelings" thoughts usually start with the words "I feel." For example, "I feel like you don't love me. I feel stupid. I feel like a failure. I feel nobody will ever trust me." Whenever you have a strong negative feeling, check it out. Look for the evidence behind the feeling. Do you have real reasons to feel that way? Or, are you feelings based on events or things from the past?

ANT #6: "Guilt Beatings"

Guilt is not a helpful emotion, especially for your deep limbic system. In fact, guilt often causes you to do those things that you don't want to do. Guilt beatings happen when you think with words like "should, must, ought or have to." Here are some examples: "I ought to spend more time at home. I must spend more time with my kids. I should have sex more often. I have to organize my office." Because of human nature, whenever we think that we "must" do something, no matter what it is, we don't want to do it. It is better to replace "guilt beatings" with phrases like "I want to do this...It fits with my goals to do that...It would be helpful to do this...." So in the examples above, it would be helpful to change those phrases to "I want to spend more time at home. It's in our best interest for my kids and I to spend more time together.

I want to please my spouse by making wonderful love with him (or her) because he (or she) is important to me. It's in my best interest to organize my office." Get rid of this unnecessary emotional turbulence that holds you back from achieving the goals you want.

ANT #7: "Labeling"

Whenever you attach a negative label to yourself or to someone else, you stop your ability to take a clear look at the situation. Some examples of negative labels that people use are "jerk, frigid, arrogant and irresponsible." Negative labels are very harmful, because whenever you call yourself or someone else a jerk or arrogant you lump that person in your mind with all of the "jerks" or "arrogant people" that you've ever known and you become unable to deal with them in a reasonable way. Stay away from negative labels.

ANT #8: "Personalization"

Personalization occurs when innocuous events are taken to have personal meaning. "My boss didn't talk to me this morning. She must be mad at me." Or, one feels he or she is the cause of all the bad things that happen, "My son got into an accident with the car. I should have spent more time teaching him to drive. It must be my fault." There are many other reasons for behavior besides the negative explanations an abnormal limbic system picks out. For example, your boss may not have talked to you because she was preoccupied, upset or in a hurry. You never fully know why people do what they do. Try not to personalize their behavior.

ANT #9 (the most poisonous red ANT): "Blame"

Blame is very harmful. When you blame something or someone else for the problems in your life, you become a victim of circumstances and you cannot do anything to change your situation. Many relationships are ruined by people who blame their partners when things go wrong. They take little responsibility for their problems. When something goes wrong at home or at work, they try to find someone to blame. They rarely admit their own problems. Typically, you'll hear statements from them like:

"It wasn't my fault that...."

"That wouldn't have happened if you had...."

"How was I supposed to know...."

"It's your fault that...."

The bottom line statement goes something like this: "If only you had done something differently, I wouldn't be in the predicament I'm in. It's your fault, and I'm not responsible."

Whenever you blame someone else for the problems in your life, you become powerless to change anything. The "Blame Game" hurts your personal sense of power. Stay away from blaming thoughts and take personal responsibility to change the problems you have.

Summary of A.N.T. Species:

1. "Always" thinking: thinking in words like always, never, no one, every one, every time, everything.
2. Focusing on the negative: only seeing the bad in a situation.
3. Fortune telling: predicting the worst possible outcome to a situation.
4. Mind reading: believing that you know what another person is thinking, even though they haven't told you.
5. Thinking with your feelings: believing negative feelings without ever questioning them.
6. Guilt beatings: thinking in words like "should, must, ought or have to."
7. Labeling: attaching a negative label to yourself or to someone else.
8. Personalization: innocuous events are taken to have personal meaning.
9. Blame: blaming someone else for your own problems.

Here are some examples of ways to kill these ANTs:

ANT	Species of ANT	Kill the ANT
You never listen to me.	Always Thinking	I get frustrated when you don't listen to me, but I know you have listened to me and will again.
The boss doesn't like me.	Mind Reading	I don't know that. Maybe she's just having a bad day. Bosses are people, too.
The whole class will laugh at me.	Fortune Telling	I don't know that. Maybe they'll really like my speech.
I'm stupid.	Labeling	Sometimes I do things that aren't too smart, but I'm not stupid.
It's your fault we have these marital problems.	Blame	I need to look at my part of the problems and look for ways I can make the situation better.

Your thoughts really matter. They can either help or hurt your deep limbic system. Left unchecked, ANTs will cause an infection in your whole body system. Whenever you notice ANTs, you need to crush them or they'll affect your relationships, your work, and your entire life. First you need to notice them. If you can catch them at the moment they occur and correct them, you take away the power they have over you. When a negative thought goes unchallenged, your mind believes it and your body reacts to it.

ANTs have an illogical logic. By bringing them into the open and examining them on a conscious level, you can see for yourself how little sense it really makes to think these kinds of things to yourself. You take back control over your own life instead of leaving your fate to hyperactive limbic conditioned negative thought patterns.

Sometimes people have trouble talking back to these grossly unpleasant thoughts because they feel that such obvious age-old "truisms" simply must be real. They think that if they don't continue to believe these thoughts that they are lying to themselves. Once again, remember that to know what is true and what is not, you have to be conscious of the thoughts and have an intelligent perspective on them. Most negative thinking is automatic and goes unnoticed. You're not really choosing how to respond to your situation, it's being chosen for you, by bad brain habits. To find out what is really true and what is not, you need to question it. Don't believe everything you hear -- even in your own mind!

I often ask my patients about their ANT population? Is it high? Low? Dwindling? Or increasing? Keep control over the ANTs in order to maintain a healthy deep limbic environment.