

## Improving Self-Esteem

### Module 5

# Negative Self-Evaluations

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## Introduction

In Module 3, we talked about how dormant low self-esteem becomes active and maintains itself until it becomes acute. When you encounter an at-risk situation, your negative core belief about yourself is activated and leads to two types of negative thoughts – *biased expectations* and *negative self-evaluations*.

In the previous module, we talked about how to address biased expectations. In this module, we will discuss negative self-evaluations in more detail, and discuss ways of changing and overcoming them. By addressing your negative self-evaluations in daily situations, you can prevent the negative beliefs you hold about yourself from being confirmed and re-activated. Again, this will help you to chip away at your low self-esteem.

## What Are Negative Self-Evaluations?

As we have already seen in Module 3, negative self-evaluations are negative thoughts that commonly occur when you encounter an 'At-Risk Situation' where your unhelpful rule or assumption is broken and your negative core beliefs have been activated. When this happens you will tend to evaluate yourself in a negative way, becoming harsh and critical of who you are as a person. You will tend to:



- Tell yourself that you “should” have done this or “shouldn’t” have done that, chastising yourself and beating yourself up, for not meeting the standards you have set for yourself
- Put negative and derogatory labels on yourself, calling yourself hurtful names like “pathetic,” “useless,” “idiot,” and
- Make sweeping generalisations about yourself, based on a very specific event, saying things such as “I am always doing this,” “I never learn,” “Everything is ruined.”

When you are so critical of yourself, you will tend to behave in particular ways – often engaging in unhelpful behaviours. You will tend to:

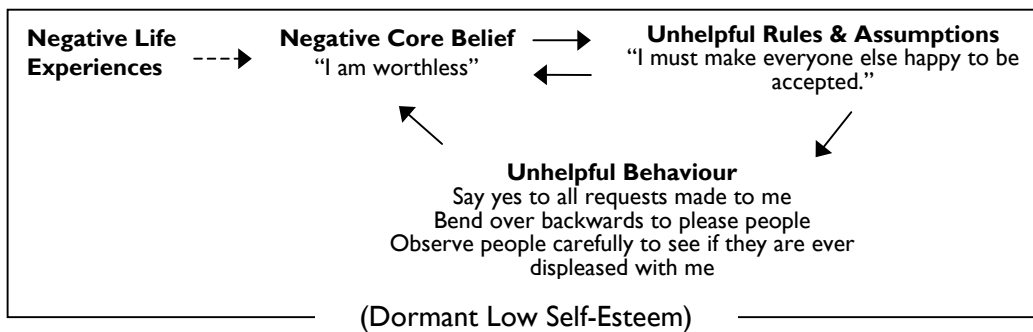
- **Withdraw** or **isolate** yourself from family or friends,
- Try to **overcompensate** for things,
- **Neglect** things (opportunities, responsibilities, self-care), or
- Be **passive** rather than assertive with others.

At the end of the day, the unhelpful thoughts and behaviours contribute to you feeling depressed, low, sad, guilty – and this is confirmation that your negative core beliefs are true.

Here’s an example of negative self-evaluations in action. You can follow this example that is illustrated in the form of the model on the next page. Let’s say that you have the negative core belief, “I am worthless.” At present, your low self-esteem is dormant as you have developed the rule and assumption, “I must make everyone else happy to be accepted.” As long as you are able to live up to your rule, you might feel okay about yourself. However, the situation is about to change. You have had to cancel dinner with a friend because of work commitments. You are now in an at-risk situation because you have disappointed someone. This means that your rule has been broken.

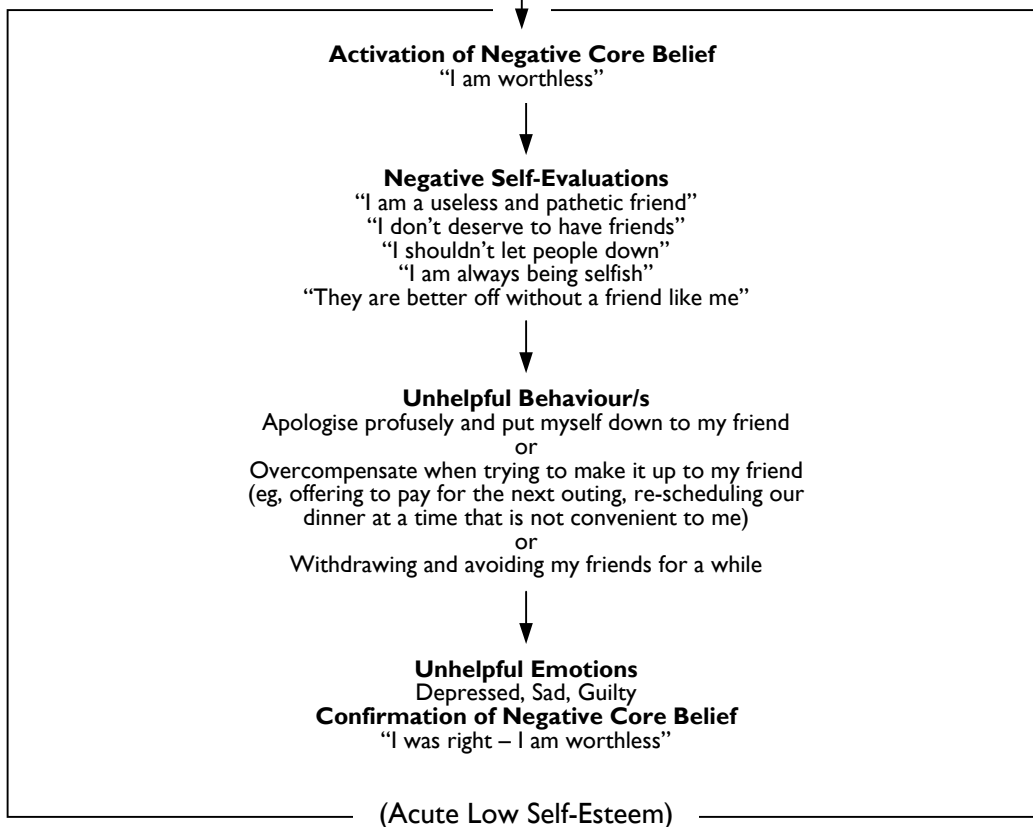
At this point, you might have thought, “I’m a useless and pathetic friend,” “I don’t deserve to have friends,” or “I should not let other people down,” and are probably feeling sad, depressed, and guilty. It’s also at this point that you could choose how to behave in this situation. You could apologise profusely and put yourself down to your friend. You could try to make up for cancelling the dinner by offering to pay for the next outing or re-scheduling your dinner to a time that suits your friend but is inconvenient to you. This is overcompensation. Alternatively, you could withdraw from your friends for a while and avoid their calls

and emails. All these are unhelpful behaviours, and they maintain your negative emotions and confirm your negative core belief.



### At-Risk Situation

Cancelled dinner with a friend because of work commitments



Continuing with the example, your belief, "I am worthless," gets confirmed in a number of ways. Firstly, it is confirmed by all the negative self-evaluations you are making – all that 'negative self-talk.' If you keep telling yourself these negative things, you will continue to believe them. Secondly, feeling depressed can confirm your belief that you are "worthless," because a symptom of depression itself is thinking negatively about everything, including yourself. Thirdly, all your unhelpful behaviours (eg., acting in a passive and apologetic way, trying to overcompensate, or withdrawing) mean that you are acting in a manner consistent with the idea that you are "worthless." So, if you act as if you are "worthless," you will continue to think you are "worthless," and feel sad or depressed.

It is important to note that some people think that making negative self-evaluations is a good thing. Some people think that:

- Being critical and harsh on yourself keeps you grounded
- It stops you from getting too big for your boots
- It prevents you from becoming a 'tall poppy' that needs to be 'cut down'
- It spurs you on, motivating you to do better and better.

Some of these might be commonly held beliefs, but are they really true? Is putting yourself down and criticising yourself actually a good and healthy thing to do? If it is, then we would do it to our loved ones regularly. When something goes wrong and our loved ones are in distress, would we help them through by abusing them, calling them names, and telling them off? Is this what we do to the people we love?

Most people would probably not agree. Most people would say that they do the exact opposite – that when times are tough, they show compassion and kindness to the ones they love, comforting them and encouraging them. So if this is what you would do for other human beings, why is it that you don't do it for yourself?

Take a moment to think about this issue of whether being harsh and critical of yourself is a healthy or unhealthy thing to do? Perhaps write down the costs of making negative self-evaluations. Note the disadvantages of being so critical of yourself. Think about how talking to yourself in such a harsh manner affects you? Does it prevent you from doing certain things? Does it make you feel a certain way? Is it unfair to yourself in some way?

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Hopefully you are coming to see that constantly making negative self-evaluations is not only generally unhelpful, it also helps keep your low self-esteem alive and well. So how could you respond differently, in a way that is inconsistent with low self-esteem?

## Challenging Negative Self-Evaluations

As we did with biased expectations, one way to address your negative self-evaluations is to challenge them, and develop **balanced self-evaluations**. Remember that our thoughts and evaluations are often opinions we have, rather than facts. Therefore they are open to question, and should not be something we just blindly accept if they are causing us distress. Instead, you can dispute, dissect, examine, and assess them – like a detective or lawyer would, to see how realistic they are and put things in perspective.

Again, challenging your negative self-evaluations isn't something you should do in your head as this can get messy and confusing. The best way is to write it down. To help you through the process, we suggest using a Thought Diary for Negative Self-Evaluations. This helps you work through the challenging process in a step-by-step way, on paper, making things clearer and more useful for you.

On the next page is an example of how to complete a Thought Diary for Negative Self-Evaluations, and following that is a blank Thought Diary for you to practise on. The Thought Diaries guide you through how to get your negative self-evaluations out on paper and challenge them.

The Thought Diary will first ask you to **Identify Your Negative Self-Evaluations**. To help you do that, first ask yourself:

- What is the situation I am in?

Then:

- What am I saying to myself?
- How am I evaluating myself?
- How am I putting myself down?
- How am I criticising myself?

After you have written these down, you'll then need to ask yourself:

- How strongly do I believe these evaluations of myself? Rate the strength of my belief between 0 and 100%
- What emotion(s) am I feeling?
- How intense are these emotions? Rate the intensity of my emotion(s) between 0 and 100%
- What unhelpful behaviours did I engage in?

Once you have completed the first section, you are ready to begin to **Challenge Your Negative Self-Evaluations**. Here are the questions asked in your Thought Diary to challenge your negative self-evaluations:

- What is the evidence *for* my evaluations?
- What is the evidence *against* my evaluations?
- Are these *opinions* I have of myself or *facts*?
- How helpful is it for me to evaluate myself in this way?
- How else could I view the situation? What are other perspectives might there be?
- What advice would I give to a friend in this same situation?
- Are there any positives in me or the situation that I am ignoring?
- What would be more helpful behaviour I could carry out?



**Note.** If you have engaged in any unhelpful behaviours, ask yourself: How could I act differently? How could I behave in a manner that is inconsistent with my negative self-evaluations? For example, instead of withdrawing and isolating yourself, be active and a part of things around you; instead of overcompensating for things, just do what you think the average person might do in this situation; instead of neglecting things, make time for them; and instead of being passive, try to be more assertive.

The ultimate aim of doing this Thought Diary is for you to develop more **Balanced Self-Evaluations**. Once you have explored the answers to the above 'challenging' questions in your Thought Diary, ask yourself:

- What would be a more balanced self-evaluation to replace my negative self-evaluation?

The final step is then to:

- Re-rate how much I now believe the original negative self-evaluations I was making,
- Re-rate how intense I now feel the emotions that I was originally feeling.

If you work through the entire Thought Diary for challenging your negative self-evaluations, it is likely that you will experience a decrease in your belief in the evaluations you were making and a decrease in the intensity of your emotions. Using a Thought Diary to develop balanced self-evaluations will help quieten rather than activate or confirm your negative beliefs about yourself. This will help you approach situations with an open mind, rather than letting your negative opinion of yourself constantly interfere with how you live your life.

Try using a Thought Diary for negative self-evaluations the next time you notice yourself feeling down, sad, depressed, guilty or hopeless, and you have the sense that you are beating yourself up, being hard on yourself, telling yourself off, and criticising yourself and your abilities. Stop yourself when you notice these sorts of feelings, and see if you can find the specific negative self-evaluations that are influencing your feelings. When you find these, use a Thought Diary to tackle them. Continue to use a Thought Diary to deal with these sorts of thoughts and feelings, until it becomes second nature. Then you will find that you can easily catch the negative self-evaluations in your head and challenge them in your head. This will take some time and a lot of practice, so for now, stick to writing it all down in your Thought Diary.

# Thought Diary for Negative Self-Evaluations

(example)

## Identify Your Negative Self-Evaluations

<b>What is the at-risk situation?</b> <i>Cancelled dinner with a friend due to work commitments</i>	<b>How much do I believe these evaluations of myself (0-100%)?</b> 85%
<b>What am I saying to myself? How am I evaluating myself, putting myself down, or criticising myself?</b> <i>I am a useless and pathetic friend; I don't deserve to have friends; I shouldn't let other people down; I am always being selfish; They are better off without a friend like me.</i>	<b>What emotion(s) am I feeling? (Rate the intensity 0-100%)</b> <i>Guilt (90%); Depressed (70%)</i>
<b>What unhelpful behaviours did I engage in?</b> <i>I apologised profusely to my friend and said that I had been a really pathetic friend to her. I also said that I would pay for our next outing and re-scheduled to a time that wasn't quite convenient for me.</i>	

## Challenge Your Negative Self Evaluations

<b>What is the evidence <u>for</u> my evaluations?</b> <i>I disappointed a friend by cancelling our dinner. This is not the first time I have disappointed a friend.</i>	<b>What is the evidence <u>against</u> my evaluations?</b> <i>I only cancelled for a very good reason. If I could have made it to dinner, I would have. Most of the time I am very considerate with all of my friends. I never intentionally hurt my friends. People have told me I am a valued friend.</i>
<b>Are these opinions I have of myself or facts?</b> <i>It's probably an opinion, not a fact.</i>	
<b>How helpful is it for me to evaluate myself in this way?</b> <i>It is pretty unfair to beat myself up for something that was mostly beyond my control. It just makes me feel really bad and like I have to overcompensate for being a "bad friend".</i>	
<b>How else could I view the situation? What are other perspectives are there?</b> <i>Things will often interfere with plans we make, it is a fact of life. It happens to everyone. Cancelling dinner with a friend due to work commitments doesn't make me a bad friend. You can't please everyone all the time - that's impossible. If the tables were turned and my friend did this to me, I wouldn't think badly of them. As long as I show I care and want to still go out with them, then I am being a good friend.</i>	
<b>What advice would I give to a friend in this same situation?</b> <i>If they are a real friend, they will understand and get over it. They won't think badly. If they are disappointed it is probably because they think you are a good friend and want to spend time with you. Being disappointed about not spending time with you doesn't mean they think you are a bad friend, or are upset with you as a person.</i>	
<b>What would be more helpful behaviour I could carry out?</b> <i>Instead of being overly apologetic and overly keen to make it up, I can just explain the circumstances, apologise once or even twice, and re-schedule our plans for a time that suits us both. I don't have to grovel or bend over backwards to prove I am a good friend.</i>	

## Balanced Self-Evaluations

<b>A more balanced evaluation of myself is:</b> <i>I am being the best friend I can be under the circumstances. My friends have told me they value me, that must mean I am a good friend. I am generally considerate to my friends and never set out to hurt people. Disappointing this friend was beyond my control. Unfortunately, you can't make everyone happy all the time.</i>	
<b>How much do I believe my original negative self-evaluation now (0-100%)</b> 35%	<b>How intense are my emotions now (0-100%)?</b> <i>Guilt (45%); Depressed (20%)</i>

# Thought Diary for Negative Self-Evaluations

## Identify Your Negative Self-Evaluations

What is the at-risk situation?	How much do I believe these evaluations of myself (0-100%)?
What am I saying to myself? How am I evaluating myself? Putting myself down? Criticising myself?	What emotion(s) am I feeling? (Rate the intensity 0-100%)
What unhelpful behaviours did I engage in?	

## Challenge Your Negative Self Evaluations

What is the evidence <u>for</u> my evaluations?	What is the evidence <u>against</u> my evaluations?
Are these <i>opinions</i> I have of myself or <i>facts</i> ?	
How helpful is it for me to evaluate myself in this way?	
How else could I view the situation? What are other perspectives are there?	
What advice would I give to a friend in this same situation?	
What would be more helpful behaviour I could carry out?	

## Balanced Self-Evaluations

A more balanced evaluation of myself is:	
How much do I believe my original negative self-evaluation now (0-100%)?	How intense are my emotions now (0-100%)?



As a preview, the next module can be thought of as complementing the present module. In the present module, we have looked at how to quash your negative self-evaluations, allowing you to be less harsh and critical of yourself. The next module also tackles this tendency to be very hard on yourself, but we will take a different route. Instead of trying to combat negative self-evaluations, we will look at how to promote balanced self-evaluations by paying attention to the positives aspects of yourself and treating yourself more kindly. Therefore, this and the next module go hand in hand, working together to tackle our automatic tendencies to evaluate ourselves in a negative way.

## **Module Summary**

- Negative self-evaluations occur when your unhelpful rules and/or assumptions are broken
- Negative self-evaluations involve: being highly self-critical, putting negative labels on yourself, and making sweeping generalisations about yourself and your abilities
- Negative self-evaluations will lead to certain types of unhelpful behaviours (eg., withdrawal, isolation, overcompensation, neglect, passivity) and unhelpful emotions (eg., depression, sadness, guilt)
- Some people think that being critical of yourself is a good thing, but at the end of the day, it is an unhelpful and unfair way to treat yourself
- One way to overcome negative self-evaluations is to challenge or dispute them using a Thought Diary. This involves identifying your negative self-evaluations, challenging your negative self-evaluations, and developing more balanced self-evaluations.



### **Coming up next ...**

In the next module, you will explore how to identify your positive qualities and treat yourself more kindly.

## **About This Module**

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### **BACKGROUND**

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that unhelpful negative emotions and behaviours are strongly influenced by problematic cognitions (thoughts). This can be found in the following:

Beck, A.T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B.F., & Emery, G. (1979). *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*. New York: Guildford.

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### **REFERENCES**

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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Fennell, M. & Jenkins, H. (2004). Low Self-Esteem. In J. Bennett-Levy, G. Butler, M.Fennell et al (Eds), *Oxford Guide to Behavioural Experiments in Cognitive Therapy*. Oxford: Oxford Medical Publications.

### **ADDITIONAL REFERENCES**

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