

ANTS-
Automatic Negative Thoughts
(Attribution Exercise, to Copy)

ANTS and ANTeaters

Thoughts can be positive or negative – we all know that! But what happens if they are negative more often than positive? If that happens we have to change those thoughts. Only we have the power to change our own negative thoughts and we do that by talking back to them. Yes, that's right, we are going to talk to our thoughts! Sound silly?

Let's look at it this way: most thoughts automatically happen. When those thoughts are negative they are "Automatic Negative Thoughts" or ANTs! Just like ants at a picnic, we can usually deal with one or two ANTs by squashing them with something bigger than they are. Sometimes we can even juggle three or even five ANTs. When the ANTs begin to grow in number, squashing them gets harder and they may affect your relationships or your self-esteem. For these ANTs we need to find an ANTeater. We don't want to let ANTs ruin our life's picnic and we have the power to squash them all by writing down our negative thoughts, reading them, and thinking of more rational responses.

There are nine different "species" of ANTs:

#1: "Always" or "Never" Thinking

Includes words like always, never, no one, everything

#2: Focusing on the Negative

Only seeing the bad parts of a situation

#3: Fortune Telling

Predicting the worst case scenario

#4: Mind Reading

Believing that you know what another person is thinking without them telling you

#5: Thinking with your Feelings

Believing negative feelings rather than questioning them

#6: Guilt Beatings

Thinking in terms of what you should have done, ought to have done

#7: Labeling

Giving yourself or someone else a negative label

#8: Personalization

Harmless events are seen as personal in nature

#9: Blame

Blaming someone else for your problems

ANTS and ANTeaters Exercise

Think back to a time when you felt overwhelmed, anxious, nervous or depressed. Write about what happened:

Now, think about the ANTs you had during this time. Write each one in the left column. In the center column, decide what species of ANT it was. In the right column, write down your ANTeater – what kinds of things could you say to that negative thought that would squash it? The first row is filled in for you to use as an example.

ANT	Species	ANTeater
My mom never listens to me.	Always or never thinking.	Last week my mom listened to me when I told her I needed help with my schoolwork. Maybe she is busy and we can talk later.

Remember – the more ANTeaters you have the safer your picnic will be!

*Adapted from Amen, D.G., and Routh, L.C. (2003). Healing anxiety and depression. New York: Berkeley Books.