



## Freeing Yourself from Destructive Thought Habits

Destructive thought habits have the power to make us excruciatingly anxious and totally miserable. They have actually been shown to cause clinical anxiety and depression. However, when we try to fight them directly it often makes them worse. In this article, we will define 4 destructive thought habits and introduce you to a much more effective approach that takes much less effort. When these thoughts have been effectively dealt with, clinical depression and anxiety improved substantially, often to the point that no medication is needed.

### The 4 Destructive Thought Habits

1. **Catastrophising** — If you're prone to stress and anxiety, you may recognise this habitual mind trap. This is when the mind interprets an event as the worst case scenario. If you notice a mark on your skin, you have a fatal skin cancer. If your friend didn't look at you while walking down the street, you think they hate you. This style of thinking quickly makes us miserable and anxious.
2. **Focusing on the negative** — We do this by discounting the positive and exaggerating the negative. Actually we all have a tendency to do this. The cave man who was busy noticing daffodils in preference to the sabre tooth tiger, was devoured by the tiger. The one that noticed the tiger, survived to pass on his genes to us. So most of us have the tendency to notice the glass is being half empty. We call this a negative perceptual bias.

This bias can be sneaky and influence us when least expected. For example, we can destroy a positive observation simply by following it with a nasty little word that is the mother of all wet blankets. That word is "but" and it is usually followed by a negative. e.g. "I got a 95% on this test, but I didn't get a 100%." Without awareness, this style of thinking will likely land you in a depressed state.

3. **Blaming** — Be careful of this one. We think we are looking for a solution by diagnosing the problem, but instead we are just digging ourselves deeper into the problem. We all do it, pointing the finger at someone else for our woes or point the finger at ourselves for others' woes. "If my boss wasn't so hard on me at work, I wouldn't be so anxious" or "It's my fault my parents got divorced."

It is difficult to get away from because much of our legal and political system is geared around this approach and it is called "accountability". The solutions that arise out of this sort of approach are often tainted by people understandably trying to avoid being blamed.

Looking directly for a solution is often a much better approach. When we do this we are able to respond. That is called "response-ability". So it is useful to compassionately notice when we get caught up in the blaming trap. Then we can remember that it doesn't cultivate solutions, and just makes we feel stuck, anxious, and miserable.





4. **Worrying** - even though worrying is solution focused it is never satisfied with any particular solution and tends to just go round in circles. It is usually associated with high levels of anxiety. It keeps us awake at night and depletes us.

## The mindfulness approach

The approach described in the article on the [just worrying technique](#) can be applied to all four of these depressing thought traps.

Cultivating the ability to be more aware of these mind traps will help you break free from them and shift your attention to more effective ways of interacting with life.

If you notice catastrophising, you can ask yourself if there is anything you need to do. For example, if you are concerned about the mole, you may make an appointment with the doctor to have a look at the spot on your arm.

After that you can say to yourself “**just** catastrophising” and either bring your attention to your breath for a moment to steady your mind or simply change the subject. It is important not to change the label to “**don't** catastrophise” as this just sets up an internal battle which creates further tension and anxiety. In contrast, the label “just catastrophising” brings you into non-judgemental awareness. It is as if you are taking the thought from in front of your face and gently moving it off to the side as opposed to aggressively pushing it away. Pushing the thought away just gives it more energy and you can end up exhausted and distraught.

By repetitively and persistently doing the gentle practice of putting the thought to the side with labels such as “just catastrophising”, “just focusing on the negative”, “just blaming” and “just worrying”, we are depriving the negative thought habit of energy and it gradually subsides.

This is a gentle persistent practice that works over time. It is a way of gradually re-training your mind so that your automatic pilot patterns of thinking tend to keep you happy, healthier, more flexible and more relaxed. Again if you want more information about this approach read the article the [just worrying technique](#).

