

Enhancing Positive Thought Patterns and Strengthening Connections: Deep Limbic System Prescriptions

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things. —Philippians 4: 8 As discussed in chapter 3, the deep limbic system processes our sense of smell, stores highly charged emotional memories, and affects sleep and appetite cycles, moods, sexuality, and bonding. To heal deep limbic system problems, we need to focus on a number of diverse prescriptions: accurate thinking, the proper management of memories, the connection between pleasant smells and moods, and building positive bonds between oneself and others. The following prescriptions, geared toward healing deep limbic system problems, are based on my own personal clinical experience with patients, as well as general knowledge about how the mind/body works.

DL PRESCRIPTION 1: KILL THE ANTS: Our overall state of mind 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." People who are depressed have one dispiriting thought following another. When they look at the past, they feel regret. When they look at the future, they feel anxiety and pessimism. In the present moment, they're bound to find something unsatisfactory. The lens through which they see themselves, others, and the world has a dim grayness. They are suffering from automatic negative thoughts, or ANTs. ANTs are cynical, gloomy, and complaining thoughts that just seem to keep marching in all by themselves. ANTs can cause people to be depressed and fatalistic. "I know I won't pass that test on Tuesday." This kind of thinking makes for a self-fulfilling prophecy: If someone has already convinced himself that he won't pass, he probably won't study very hard and he won't pass the test. 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 caused by 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. 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 other examples of typical ANTs: "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." Healing the deep limbic system requires healing 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 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 Realize that your thoughts are real: • You have a thought. • Your brain releases chemicals. • An electrical transmission goes across your brain. • 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 Notice how negative thoughts affect your body. Every time you have an angry thought, an unkind thought, a sad thought, or a cranky thought, your brain releases 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 Institute of Mental Health, demonstrated this phenomenon in an elegant study of brain function. He studied the activity of the brain in ten normal women under three different conditions: when they were thinking 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 Notice how positive thoughts affect your body. 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 cool your deep limbic system). Think about the last time you had a really happy thought. How did your body feel? When most people are happy, their muscles relax, their hearts beat more slowly, their hands become dry, and they breathe more slowly. Your body also reacts to your good thoughts.

STEP 4 Notice how your body reacts to every thought you have. We know from polygraphs or lie detector tests, too, that your body reacts to your thoughts. 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 asks questions, like “Did you steal that car?” If the person did steal the car, his body is likely to exhibit a “stress” response. His hands get colder, his heart goes faster, his blood pressure goes up, his breathing gets faster, his muscles get tight, and his hands sweat more. The reactions take place almost immediately, 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 the subject did not steal the car, it is likely that his body will experience a “relaxation” response. His hands will become warmer, his heart rate will slow, his blood pressure will go down, his breathing will become slower and deeper, his muscles will relax, and his hands will become drier. Again, almost immediately, his body has reacted to his thoughts. This happens not only when you’re asked about telling the truth— your body reacts to every thought you have, whether about work, friends, family, or anything else.

STEP 5 Think of bad thoughts as pollution. 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 frequently develop physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches. 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.

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 Understand that your automatic thoughts don't always tell the truth. Unless you think about your thoughts, they are automatic; "they just happen." But even if your thoughts just happen, they are not necessarily correct. Your thoughts do not always tell the whole 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 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 hurt you. Unfortunately, if you never challenge your thoughts, you just "believe them" as if they were true.

STEP 7 Talk back to ANTs. You can train your thoughts to be positive and hopeful, or you can allow them to be negative and upset you. Once you learn about your thoughts, you can choose to think good thoughts and feel better, 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, as I'll explain below. When you just think a negative thought without challenging it, your mind believes it and your body reacts to it. When you correct negative thoughts, you take away their power over you.

STEP 8 Exterminate the ANTs. Think of these negative thoughts that invade your mind like ants that bother you 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, become more irritating. Ten or twenty negative thoughts, like ten or twenty ants at a picnic, may cause you to pick up and leave. 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 catch yourself thinking, "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 seem worse than they really are. Think of these nine ways as different species or types of ANTs. 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 they are particularly harmful. Notice and exterminate ANTs whenever possible.

Amen, Daniel G. (2008-06-10). Change Your Brain, Change Your Life: The Breakthrough Program for Conquering Anxiety, Depression, Obsessiveness, Anger, and Impulsiveness (Kindle Locations 1103-1104). Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.