

## **HANDOUT 6-G**

### **ANT COLONIES: HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS UNDERNEATH THE ANTS**

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Perhaps you find yourself having the same ANTS and experiencing the same troubling emotions over and over. You dispute your ANTS in one situation, only to find them plaguing you in another.

You may feel tempted to criticize yourself about your negative thinking (i.e., have ANTS about your ANTS), but there is no need to do so.

The same ANTS come back to you repeatedly because we all have certain underlying beliefs that influence how we think and feel about any situation. Cognitive behavioral therapists have several terms to describe these underlying belief patterns or biases. Some use the term “schemas,” while others use the term “core beliefs.” I like the term “hidden assumptions.” Sometimes, I refer to these as the “ANT colonies” because they are “underground” and the ANTS emerge out of them.

We might be vaguely aware of these underlying beliefs, but often we do not recognize them until someone points them out to us. Even then, we may be reluctant to take an objective look at ourselves and see how our thinking may be adding to our distress.

Just like with ANTS, there is no need to beat yourself up for having these hidden assumptions. Everyone has them! The key is the willingness to identify what they are and then make a conscious decision as to whether or not you want to change them.

There are as many different hidden assumptions as there are people, but following are a few common ones.

“Things must turn out the way I want.” It is natural to want things your way, but when you think that they must be your way, you are setting yourself up for frustration. There are things we can control and things we can’t, so we can’t always expect things to go our way. A secret of happiness is to be able to adapt to difficult situations. A healthier perspective would be, “I will do what I can to make things turn out my way, but I will adapt if they don’t.”

“People should meet my expectations.” Much of our anger and hurt feelings come from expecting someone to behave the way we want. If you expect a friend to remember your birthday, you will be hurt if she doesn’t. If you expect your spouse to always listen to you attentively, you will be angry when he doesn’t. It is natural to have expectations, but we are wise to not hold on to them tightly. I find it best to focus on my behavior. Am I treating people honorably? Am I expressing my wishes clearly and respectfully? If so, then that is all I can do. I cannot control what someone else does.

“It’s always my fault.” It is always wise to take responsibility for our actions. It does no good to blame other people or outside influences (e.g., the economy) for our problems. However, neither is it helpful to heap criticism on ourselves when things turn out badly. A hallmark of maturity is the ability to recognize our part in the problem, learn from our mistakes, and do our best to accept the consequences. Having done that, do we really need to berate ourselves?

“It’s never my fault, it’s always your (their) fault.” Some people cannot tolerate any criticism and will deflect it in any way possible. This sensitivity to criticism may stem from other self-defeating attitudes such as “It is awful to be criticized,” or “Any criticism at all means that I am inadequate.” When we hold these beliefs, we come off as arrogant and we don’t give ourselves the opportunity to honestly look at ourselves and learn from our mistakes.



"People are against me." I hear this all the time. "My boss has it in for me." "No one in the church talks to me." "The teacher picks on me." In almost any social setting, they see themselves as being discriminated against. They feel that they are the victim or scapegoat. They can cite many incidences to support their belief, but they do not notice anything good that happens to them. Of course, there can sometimes be some truth to their perceptions, but it is often their own negative attitude that has led to their being disliked. A wise person once told me, "People don't do things against you; they do them for themselves." I find it useful to assume that people are at least neutral toward me until I have clear evidence to the contrary. If I have clear evidence that someone doesn't like me, I will consider my options. Should I try to change their perception or can I accept their negative opinion?

"Any failure is a sign of my inadequacy." Any worthwhile endeavor involves some element of risk. In spite of our best efforts, we might fail to reach our goal. Some people believe that any failure is so shameful that they don't want to try anything if there is any chance of failures. They use this fear of failure as an excuse not to try anything worthwhile. Many dreams are never fulfilled because the fear of failure got in the way.

"I'm not as good as other people." An unfortunate human habit is comparing ourselves to others and believing that we don't stack up. Other people are smarter, better looking, or have achieved a higher level of success. This self-defeating attitude is the source of much of our misery. If someone points out a strength we "discount the positive" by minimizing its importance. It really makes no sense to compare ourselves to others. If you envy your wealthy relative, will your life really be better if he loses his fortune? So why compare yourself to him? If you want to work to make more money, do so. But do it because it's important to you, not to keep up with your relative.

"I'm better than others." This is sometimes difficult to see because no one wants to admit to arrogance or self-righteousness. Instead, this attitude reveals itself in other ways. In pointing out how our co-workers don't get along, we are suggesting that we are somehow above such pettiness. In describing the challenges we are facing, we are subtly pointing out how noble and long-suffering we are. I am all for healthy self-esteem, but we create problems for ourselves when we see ourselves as fundamentally different from the rest of humanity.

"I can't stand this." "This is awful." "I wouldn't be able to stand it if ..." All of these phrases suggest a perceived inability (or unwillingness) to endure anything that might be difficult, challenging, or troubling. A person says he will "go crazy" if he doesn't have anything to do. Someone else says it is "awful" to be rejected or to be alone. We all wish that life was always rosy, but it just isn't. Things happen that are inconvenient, unfortunate, disappointing, embarrassing, or frustrating. Yet very few things happen that we can't adapt to, bounce back from, or even grow from. Yes, we do our best to prevent bad things from happening, but it's rarely the end of the world if they do.

"I have to please everybody else. It is awful to be disliked or rejected." Have you ever noticed that even though you didn't like a particular person, you still wanted them to like you? Some of us will go to any length to avoid the disapproval of others. This includes a kind of "all or none thinking," which says "If they dislike anything about me, they dislike me completely." With this mindset, any social situation becomes a performance in which we try to control the thoughts of others. But how much control do we really have over the thoughts of others? This self-defeating attitude is at the core of most social anxiety. Sometimes, a person with this mindset will grow tired of this way of thinking and will switch to the opposite extreme: "Other people be damned! I don't care what they think!" This sounds very confident and brave, but people with this attitude come off as arrogant and abrasive and may suffer just as much as those who try too hard to please others. I think that balance is called for here. Yes, it's better to be liked and accepted, but it is not the end of the world if we aren't. We can choose to treat others with kindness and courtesy, and take our chances with how they feel about us.



"Other people are all critical and judgmental." This self-defeating attitude often accompanies the one immediately above, and is at the core of most social anxiety. So, even though we falsely believe that it is essential to please others, it is very unlikely we will. No wonder we're anxious! Are there critical and judgmental people in the world? Of course. But is it helpful to assume that everyone is that way? Again, it's best to assume people are neutral until we can clear evidence otherwise.

"I have to control my thoughts. Bad thoughts make me a bad person!" This is a kind of mental and emotional perfectionism. The truth is that thoughts come and go and it's very unlikely we can completely control our thinking process. We can only control how we respond to our thoughts. Likewise, even the most morally upright people have negative thoughts. Trying too hard not to think something almost guarantees that we will think it. Yes, our thoughts are important, but no one thought defines who we are.