

## HANDOUT 6-B

### VARIETIES OF AUTOMATIC NEGATIVE THOUGHTS (ANTS)

---

**A. Fortune Telling:** We are predicting that something bad will happen. We will flunk out of school, lose our job, or catch a serious disease. Often we are overestimating the likelihood that the bad thing will happen. Fortune telling is the basis of almost all anxiety and worry.

**B. Catastrophic Thinking:** This often goes along with fortune telling. Not only will the bad thing happen, but the consequences will be terrible. We are overestimating the consequence of the bad event and underestimating our ability to cope. So, it would be “terrible” if we are late or “awful” if we get a low grade on a test. Minor failings, setbacks, frustrations, and mistakes are seen as more awful than they really are. Catastrophic thinking is the basis for severe anxiety.

**C. Mind Reading:** We assume that people are having negative thoughts about us. At a party my thoughts are, “These people don’t like me.” If you have to give a brief talk to some co-workers, you think, “They will be able to tell that I’m anxious and I will make a fool of myself.” When we think this way, we turn every social event into a performance during which we must control the thoughts of other people. Mind reading is the cause of social anxiety.

**D. All or None Thinking:** We think in rigid, black or white categories. If we don’t score 100 on the test, we feel like a complete failure. If someone doesn’t like something about me, they dislike everything about me. This can lead to anxious perfectionism and low self-esteem.

**E. Overgeneralization:** One or two events make us believe that something is “always” or “never” true. Here are some common examples: “Nothing ever works out for me.” “I’m always messing up.” “I’m never going to succeed at this.” Overgeneralization is often the basis for pessimism, negativity, discouragement, and low self-esteem.

**F. Mental Filter:** We focus on the most negative aspect of a situation and fail to notice what might be more positive (or at least neutral). For example, you get a number of positive responses to your presentation, but all you can think about is the one critical response. You focus on one undesirable trait and lose sight of your positive qualities. If you have free time, all you can think about is how bored you are and don’t look for positive things to do. If you are stuck in heavy traffic, you focus on how “awful” it is that you have to wait and don’t think about how nice it is to have a car. This is the “glass half-empty” approach. Mental filter is often the basis for depression, pessimism, discouragement, and low self-esteem.

**G. “Should” Thoughts:** When we think this way, we are requiring the world, other people, and even ourselves to live up to our expectations. It is an unwillingness to accept what is. I am angry at you because you “should” have remembered my birthday. I feel guilty and inadequate because I “should” be making more money. “Should” thoughts about others provoke anger; “should” thoughts toward ourselves provoke guilt.

**H. Labeling:** We apply negative labels toward others and ourselves. The list of labels is endless: lazy, stupid, rude, insensitive, overly sensitive, and so on. In reality, labels are not accurate because no one is always lazy, stupid, rude, etc. When we label ourselves, we feel guilty or inadequate. When we label others, we feel angry.

**I. Discounting the Positive:** We minimize the significance of our accomplishments, successes, and blessings. Somehow, they just “don’t count.” “Yes, I won the tennis match, but my opponent had a bad day.” “Yes, I was accepted by many colleges, but I didn’t get into the best ones.” “Yes, I got the promotion, but there wasn’t much competition.”

**J. Emotional Reasoning:** We believe that our emotions are an accurate reflection of reality. In the middle of a panic attack, I feel like “I’m going crazy” or “I have to get out of here.” Because I feel like a “loser,” I must be one. If I feel rejected, I must have been rejected. Since I feel guilty, I must have done something wrong.