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Your Brain Is Wired For
Automatic Negative Thoughts,
Here's How To Change It

Overcoming Your ANTs:

AUTOMATIC NEGATIVE THOUGHTS



Picture this in your mind's eye:

You've had an unusually difficult day at work. As you *clock out* and begin your commute (whether from your home office or an office across town), you can hear the butternut squash soup and grilled salmon you had planned for dinner calling your name.

You head to the kitchen to start preparing the mouth-watering meal you've earned after such a stressful day... only to find your plans ruined.

Your kitchen is absolutely overridden with ants.

Thousands of them, perhaps millions. A full-out ant infestation. They're crawling everywhere and over everything. So many ants, they're crawling on top of one another.

And just like that, your plans for a delicious dinner evaporate.

That's exactly what happened to me nearly 30 years ago.

On a day where I had seen 4 suicidal patients, 2 runaway teenagers, and 2 couples on the brink of divorce, I wanted nothing more than to de-stress and reset my mood with a brain-healthy dinner. Instead, when I walked through the door, I was met with an absolute ant infestation.

As I was stomping, shooing, and spraying the colony of ants away, a thought struck me:

Every patient I saw that day had a similar infestation of ANTs. Only theirs were not physical insects infesting their homes but thought patterns and beliefs infesting their minds and causing their predicaments.

From that day forward, I began calling those thought patterns *Automatic Negative Thoughts* (or, ANTs for short).

In this brief guide, you will discover the seven most persistent types of ANTs that I have seen as both a clinical psychiatrist and through the brain imaging work we do at Amen Clinics. More than that, you will learn seven simple and specific strategies for *overcoming* your ANTs so that you can begin to live the ANT-free life you truly deserve.



In your service,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Daniel". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Daniel G. Amen, MD

ANT #1

The All-or-Nothing ANT

These ANTs treat the words *maybe*, *sometimes*, and *perhaps* as four-letter words, preferring to speak in terms of *always* or *never*, *all* or *none*, and *everyone* or *every time*. It's *black or white* thinking with no room for nuance or *gray*.

Examples of All-or-Nothing ANTs:

- *We always fight. We'll never be able to fix our relationship.*
- *Why do bad things always happen to me?*
- *My kids never listen to me.*
- *Every time I try to eat right, I fail.*



SMART TIP: Questioning these ANTs will help to send them packing.

ANT #2

Just the Bad ANTs

The *Just the Bad* ANT is unable to see anything good or positive in the world. More than merely dwelling on negative experiences or situations, this ANT loves to take a *positive* experience, relationship, or situation and turn it into a negative one.

Some examples of Just the Bad ANTs:

- *I found some amazing new books at the library, but there were a couple of noisy children running around so I don't think I'll ever go back.*
- *I wanted to get 100 likes on my new social media post, but I only got 76. Why do I even bother? I'm such a complete failure.*
- *I gave a presentation at work that I thought went really well, but the woman presenting after me got a louder applause. They must have enjoyed her presentation much more than mine.*



SMART TIP: Putting a positive spin on negative thoughts will lead to positive changes in your brain.

ANT #3

Guilt-Beating ANTs

Guilt is *not* a helpful motivator of behavior and yet it has power over so many of us. These *Guilt-Beating* ANTs are not only counterproductive to your personal goals but lead to self-defeating decisions and far less joy in your life.

If these statements sound familiar, you are likely dealing with Guilt-Beating ANTs:

- *I have to stop eating so much sugar.*
- *I should call my parents more often.*
- *I need to exercise more regularly.*
- *I must try harder.*



SMART TIP: Replace your "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts" with "I want to..." or "This fits with my goals..."

ANT #4

Labeling ANTs

When you label yourself (or someone else) with a negative term, you rob your brain of the ability to assess situations or people properly. If you label yourself an *idiot*, you're telling your brain to group you with every person you've ever thought acted unwisely.

Even worse, the more often you assign yourself or others with negative labels, the more you strengthen those negative pathways in your brain. Those "ruts" grow deeper and it becomes harder to navigate your way out.

Perhaps you recognize these examples of *Labeling* ANTs:

- *I'm such a moron.*
- *She's so lazy.*
- *He'll never amount to anything.*
- *I'm useless.*
- *I'm a failure.*



SMART TIP: Use positive, accurate labels for yourself, your kids, and others.

ANT #5

Fortune-Teller ANTs

The *Fortune-Teller* ANTs think they know what will happen in the future but are only focused on projecting negative outcomes that have little basis in reality. They are unable to perceive any possible positive future. As such, they want you to live in fear of every uncertainty in your life.

Know this: these ANTs aren't helpful. They don't advise you on how to *prepare* for the future or possible outcomes. Instead, they can cause unnecessary anxiety and force you to live in a place of scarcity.

Never listen to these lying ANTs:

- *If I apply for that scholarship, I'll just get rejected.*
- *If I take that risk, I'll fall flat on my face and look like a fool.*
- *After my breakup, no one will love me ever again.*
- *All my investments are going to tank.*



SMART TIP: Don't give these ANTs the power they seek. Talk back to them and tell them, "I will succeed!" or "If I take that risk, there's a great chance it will work out!"

ANT #6

Mind Reader ANTs

This ANT believes it knows with 100% certainty what is going on in someone else's mind. Even though the other person has not told you their thoughts or opinions, the *Mind-Reader* ANT tells you exactly what they are thinking.

A sideways glance from your boss means he hates you and you're about to be fired. Your friend taking too long to reply to a text message means she is mad at you. Then, without verification from the other person, these ANTs cause you to ruminate on your unconfirmed assumptions.

The *Mind Reader* ANT sounds like this:

- *My coworkers don't respect me because I'm fat.*
- *My friends only invite me to events because they feel sorry for me.*
- *My parents aren't proud of me.*
- *My spouse doesn't love me anymore.*



SMART TIP: Stop trying to read people's minds and ask them to clarify what they are thinking.

ANT #7

Blaming ANTs

This ANT doesn't want you to ever admit your mistakes or take responsibility for your actions. Even worse, the *Blaming ANTs* aren't interested in learning how to fix things or make situations right. It wants you to play the victim!

Think of the *Blaming ANT* as a dangerous red ANT because not only will it rob your joy, but these ANTs also drain you of personal power. When you are constantly the victim, you lose agency to change your situation.

Examples of the *Blaming ANTs*:

- *It's your fault I failed because you didn't help me prepare enough.*
- *You didn't call me early enough to get ready for tonight. Now my entire evening is ruined.*
- *I can't meet this deadline because my boss didn't give me enough information.*



SMART TIP: It's your life, so take responsibility for it. Stop playing the victim card.

7 Strategies To Overcome Your ANTs

When my kitchen was infested with ants all those years ago, I relied on the tools at my disposal (bug spray, broom, etc.) to help me remove the ants and return our kitchen to its normal, clean condition.

The same is true when removing an infestation of ANTs (automatic negative thoughts) from your brain. Many of the tools you need to overcome your ANTs are already at your disposal. Here are seven strategies that I recommend.

1 Eliminate ANTs as they attack

You can do this in three simple steps. First, write down the negative thought. Next, identify which ANT species (either one or multiple from the list above). Third, ask yourself if the thought is 100% accurate. As soon as you remind yourself that it's not true, the ANT begins to weaken.

2 Stop the thought by paying attention to it

Perhaps it seems counterintuitive, but think of your ANTs like an attention-starved child. As soon as you acknowledge the child (or ANT), it will begin to loosen its demand for attention and control. So acknowledge the thought and then move on.

3 Start every morning by saying, "Today is going to be a great day!"

Before you get out of bed in the morning, set your intentions for the day. When you direct your thoughts to "Today is going to be a great day," your unconscious brain will help you uncover the reasons why it will be so. Each morning, remind yourself (out loud, if possible) that this day will be a good day.

- 4 End every evening by asking, "What went well today?"

Before you close your eyes for the night, write down (or meditate) on three things that went well that day. Doing this will set up your dreams to be more positive, giving you a better night's sleep, which in turn helps you stay in control of your thinking patterns.

- 5 Create optimism with a dose of reality

Be forward thinking and learn to see the possibilities that are all around you. A more-optimistic outlook is generally associated with a higher quality of life.

- 6 Change the "B" stuff

People or events cannot make you do anything on their own. It is your interpretation of those situations that cause your behavior. That perception is what is referred to as the "B" stuff. Questioning the "B" can make a huge difference in your relationships.

- 7 Watch the movie, Pollyanna

If you need a lesson in positive thinking and turning bad situations into good, then this classic Disney movie (or the book on which it's based) is highly recommended.



Daniel G. Amen, MD

Dr. Amen has helped millions of people change their brains and lives through his health clinics, best-selling books, products and public television programs.

Dr. Amen is one of America's leading psychiatrists and brain health experts. He has authored or coauthored 70 professional articles and more than 30 books, including New York Times mega-bestseller *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life*. He has appeared on numerous television shows including Dr. Phil, Larry King, Dr. Oz, The Doctors, and The View.

His breakthrough public television programs on brain and mental health have made him well loved by millions of viewers seeking guidance on memory, attention, other cognitive functions, emotional issues, behavior, and more.

The Washington Post has called Dr. Amen "America's most popular psychiatrist" because of his wildly popular clinics which have over 4,000 patient visits a month and has the world's largest database of functional brain scans relating to behavior, totaling over 150,000 scans on patients from 120 countries.

Dr. Amen has appeared in movies, including *After the Last Round* and *The Crash Reel* and was a consultant for the movie *Concussion*, starring Will Smith. He has also appeared on the Emmy-winning show *The Truth About Drinking*.

His work has been featured in Newsweek, Time, Huffington Post, ABC World News, 20/20, BBC, London Telegraph, Parade Magazine, New York Times, New York Times Magazine, Washington Post, LA Times, Men's Health, Bottom Line and Cosmopolitan.

More Helpful, Science-Backed Resources Available:

When your brain works right, you work right. Discover more skills and habits to upgrade the "software" between your ears today.

TAKE THE QUIZ



Kate Kunkel

Kate Kunkel is a vegan nutritionist, health coach, and the creator of Brain Health Matters, a series of online courses, programs, and educational events all designed to help you build a healthier body so you can have a better brain.

Kate is also an **Amen Certified Brain Health Professional** and **Licensed Amen Brain Trainer**.

In addition to her own research and work with clients, Kate now enhances her offerings to clients with Dr. Amen's powerful brain enhancement programs, all of which

were created to help people have better memories, enhanced mental health and greater cognitive reserve.

In her bestselling book, "[Don't Let the Memories Fade](#)" Kate shares the holistic brain health program she created as she has spent the last decade helping people improve their overall health to prevent dementia and create a healthier, more vibrant future filled with robust memories.

Kate believes that ***it is never too early to look after your brain, but it can become too late***, so she encourages everyone to start NOW with the lifestyle changes that will reduce the risk of dementia while improving your quality of life now and in the future.

