The MS Emotional Wellness Teleseries
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Self-Defeating Thinking:
How to Conquer it
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1) The first step in conquering Self-Defeating Thinking is to BECOME AWARE of the self-defeating thoughts that you have a habit of thinking.They feel automatic. These thoughts and beliefs keep us stressed, depressed or just plain stuck.

In this moment, write down a self-defeating,self-limiting or negative thought you have about yourself or your life. Write another self-defeating thought you tend to have about MS.

a) Self-defeating thoughts or self-limiting thoughts are usual stressful in nature;it doesn't feel good to think them but we get in the habit of thinking them, time and time again. We convince ourselves that we cannot improve on the negative thought.

b) Step one is to BECOME AWARE of recurring negative thoughts or beliefs that keep you stuck, stressed or demoralized. They may seem so obvious and familiar, you may not even realize that they are in your way. Or they may seem so true to you, there doesn't seem a way to change them.

2) Next, is to come up with a Replacement Thought that is less stressful and less pessimistic. One way to look at it is to come up with a thought that is:

a) KINDER: realistic, but kinder. In this way, you will start a practice of treating yourself with kindness.

b) and a replacement thought that Opens up the Possibility of a solution

Remember: We are complex human beings....so most negative thoughts or beliefs have some grain of truth to them. The problem is we let this grain become the whole shaft of wheat. We need to stop generalizing in that way. So, first acknowledge the grain of truth to the negative thought or belief and then replace it with a more balanced, positive thought.

For example, When I catch myself thinking: "I've got too much to do and I don't know how I'm going to get it all done." I take a breath and replace the thought with: "Yes, it's true I have a lot to do but I can get it done one step at a time, one event at a time and remember to enjoy each one."

3) Another important technique is to remind yourself of a PAST SUCCESS related to your negative thought. So I can say to myself, "You had a really packed schedule the other day and you got through it fine. You just need to make sure to eat healthy meals throughout the day to nourish yourself and drink your favorite green tea and also take some 5 min breathing/stretching breaks throughout the day. (a type of solution)"

SIX COMMON SELF-DEFEATING WAYS OF THINKING:
Notice ones you are in the habit of thinking and make a commitment to yourself to catch yourself using these thoughts and conquer them in the moment.

FIRST: ***All-or-Nothing Thinking:***

1) You see things in black and white categories. If your performance, or something you've made or done falls short of great or perfect, you feel defeated and tell yourself you're not good at the task; you give up trying it again or you just feel embarrassed that you failed to be perfect.

2) If you can't accomplish the whole task, you won't do any of it.

3) If you can't sing or paint like before, you won't sing or paint at all.

To conquer **All-or-Nothing Thinking** is to come up with replacement thoughts that are realistic but kinder and more balanced or lead to a solution.

Examples:

1)"The class I taught was awful. " Replacement: The class I led was not as well-organized as i usually like but it was fine and the class members said they found it helpful.

2)"I don't have the time or energy to clear my desk. Forget it, I'll never get it done." Replacement thought: "It's OK if I can't clear my whole desk today. I can clear one pile and feel good about that."

3)" Ugh, I just can't paint like I used to before MS." Replacement thought: Of course I am not painting as well as I did before because I haven't painted in awhile and I am rusty. I need lots of practice. I think I will just start with playing around with mixing colors and making designs before I get to a landscape.

SECOND: ***Comparison Thinking***

1) If you compare yourself to others who have more or can do more you will make yourself depressed.
2) If you compare yourself to your younger, more able-bodied self or your pre-MS self, when you could do more, you will depress yourself. Remember....we can choose how we think.
3) People can also use comparisons to experiences in the past to rob themselves of joy in the present. For example, a person can go to an elegant 5-star restaurant and have a exquisitely delicious meal and . Then for the rest of his life he can eat at other restaurants and say: "This just isn't as good as that meal I once had in that five-star restaurant."

How do we conquer the self-defeating nature of Comparison thinking?

Rabbi Pliskin, a Happiness expert, told this story: A sage once said, "In spiritual matters look up and raise your sights. But when it comes to material and physical matters look down."

That is, in spiritual matters related to contributing to the greater good, keep looking up to role models to motivate and inspire yourself to reach higher levels of giving back to society, or gaining inner peace or being present in the moment.
But when it comes to appreciating your physical self, your possessions and your financial situation, look at those who have less than you and gain a greater sense of appreciation for what you do have.

THIRD: ***Negative Detail Filter:*** You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of red ink that discolors the entire cup of water.

To conquer this: We need to gather 5 positives in our day, for every negative because of the power of the negative to overtake our mood. We need to soothe ourselves when faced with something that isn't going right and take a breath, slow down, call on patience and remind ourselves of 5 specific things that have gone right that day.

FOURTH: ***Emotional Reasoning:*** You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true." The cognitive experts say: We think, we feel and then we act.

One way to conquer emotional reasoning is to change one of the other 2 : Change your thinking or change your actions and you will FEEL DIFFERENTLY....if they are the kinder thoughts or the actions that get you UNSTUCK, you will FEEL BETTER.

FIFTH: *Catastrophic Thinking:* You exaggerate the possibility of negative consequences and you inappropriately shrink the importance of positive attributes of yourself or positive occurrences. You anticipate that things will turn out badly and feel convinced that your intuition is right. You even think that this way of thinking will protect you from feeling devastated when things do turn out badly. But this is never true.
How to conquer this: What is better, is to believe, visualize and even expect that the positive will happen and then have a plan for how to handle it if the negative happens because bad things do happen.

SIXTH: Over-*Personalization:* You see yourself as the primary cause of some negative event for which, in fact, you were not primarily responsible. Or you feel a negative event has occurred because you are being punished in some way or you have attracted the negative. OR You are quick to assume that people don't like you when they aren't responsive to you rather than assuming that they are busy, tired or distracted themselves. Then when you find out they were struggling, you feel terribly guilty that you ever doubted them and you feel bad about yourself.....it's a vicious cycle to get out of.

The way out of the cycle is too assume everyone else has their issues and their troubles and stop taking things so personally. Be as forgiving of others as you need to be of yourself.

Adapted from: *The Feeling Good Handbook* by David D Burns, MD, 1989.

the Dalai Lama
spoke many years ago in which he responded to a
desperate woman struggling with depression. She asked,
" How can I stop my negative thinking?" He replied,"We
all are of two minds, one negative, one positive. In
some of us,like the depressed, the negative appears to
have taken control, but we must strive to answer each
negative thought with a positive one. Over time, we
can eventually bring our minds into balance, and even
shift the balance to positive".

Dear Class Participants,
I wish you many good moments of replacing your self-defeating thinking with
thoughts that are kinder, more balanced and lead to
life-affirming actions in the New Year!

I look forward to connecting with you
in the next classes in 2012.

warm wishes,
Catherine Freemire