

Take Your Negative Thoughts to Court – 4 Steps to Examine the Evidence

Social anxiety comes with an inner voice that is full of dire predictions and frightening outcomes. These thoughts and beliefs can limit us and keep us in a state of fear.

But how do you get rid of them?

It's important to become aware of these thoughts and challenge them, instead of just automatically believing them.

Just because we tell ourselves something, or predict something or worry about something doesn't mean it is true. It's time to take your thoughts and question them. Play detective. Interrogate them. Be suspicious of them. Put them to the test. Is what these thoughts are saying true or are there some large gaping holes in their testimony?



Try these 4 Steps you can use to challenge your negative anxious thoughts. It's easiest to understand if we use a real example. One common fear is eating in public places like restaurants. But this system works with all kinds of negative anxiety producing thoughts.

Here's an example with a real anxious thought:

Step 1 – Identify the anxious thought.

Anxious thought: "If I eat in a restaurant everyone will stare at me and think about how weird I am. They will think I am a loser. I will be so embarrassed that I will never be able to go out again."

Step 2 - Make a list of some alternative possibilities.

"Most people in a restaurant are so busy eating and talking that they don't really notice other people eating."

“I am capable of eating my food using utensils just like anyone else. There is really no reason for anyone to pay any attention to the way I eat.”

“No one will even notice me eating. They will be too busy.”

“If my hands shake when I am eating people will probably not notice or if they do they might wonder if I’m nervous. They have no reason to label me a “loser” because of that.”

“If I happen to spill something, people will probably think its an accident. At worst they might think I was awkward.”

Step 3 – Gather the Evidence

Evidence supporting my anxious belief

- I have felt uncomfortable in restaurants before
- I tend to feel extremely aware of myself and my body in public places.
- Sometimes my hands shake when I eat in public. I am very aware of that. I worry about what others think of that and it makes me feel worse.
- A couple of times I have split food on my shirt when eating and someone brought it to my attention politely, or no one said anything and I worried about how people had noticed it all night.
- I once spilt a large glass of milk all over the table at a restaurant. Someone got angry and called me names.

Evidence Against the Anxious Thought

- The majority of times I eat food and absolutely nothing untoward happens. I’m generally a successful eater.
- I know the socially acceptable ways to eat and use my utensils in a restaurant, and if there is something I’m unsure of I can easily look it up on the internet.
- I have been around people who have spilt food on their clothing and haven’t judged them negatively for it.
- I have been around people who have accidentally split food or drink on the table and it wasn’t a big deal to me. We just cleaned it up. Others didn’t seem to mind too much either.

- I think the person who called me names when I spilt milk that time was being harsh and cruel. It was not the behavior of a normal average person. The people at the restaurant are more likely to be normal average people.
- Sometimes I have seen other people whose hands shake. I have never thought they were losers because of that.
- I have seen or heard of other people spilling food or drink. I think that everyone has had this happen to them at some time or other.
- Most people seem to be pretty understanding of food related mishaps. It's just something that occasionally happens. It's no big deal.
- If I am frequently associating with people who call names, and are extremely critical or harsh about normal occurrences I should reconsider my choices. Most normal people do not behave in this way. Unless I am choosing to hang around at the restaurant with a group of people who are typically cruel, the people at the restaurant are likely to be regular average people who do not make extreme judgements against people for minor things.

Step 4 - Develop a More Realistic Belief

Although I am often super aware of myself and might feel self-conscious, I generally eat just like other folks do and there is no reason for people to stare at me or be critical of me. If I happen get shaky hands or spill something most people will just think it's an accident. Most people have also done something like that themselves and would be unlikely to label me as a "loser".

It's Your Turn

Now you try these steps. Take an example out of your own life. Identify a negative anxiety inducing thought that troubles you. Go through each of the 4 steps and gather evidence for and against this thought.

Email me if you have questions or comments or have a particularly pesky thought.

If you think this would benefit a friend please pass it on – but please include my website as the source.
Thanks! ~Jenna

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