A Practical Guide To Reframing Your Thoughts And Making Yourself Happier

“*My life has been filled with terrible misfortunes, most of which have never happened.*”

What a great quote by Mark Twain. It humorously summarizes something that is so true, so important, and so often ignored.

Our minds are constantly bombarded with negative thoughts, visions of horrible things that may happen to us, and terrifying reasons not to do the things we want to do.

And yet in the end, these horrible things rarely happen. The thoughts cause pain by twisting yourself into thinking that things are not “kol beseder” (everything is ok, or s’all good, in Hebrew).

The worst part is that these thoughts disturb us for so long and we never do anything about them!

Well, that’s about to change.

Luckily, we have a very powerful technique available to us called “reframing”. Reframing involves identifying our unhelpful thoughts and replacing them with more positive or adaptive
When Is Reframing Useful?

You are free to reframe literally any thought you ever have into something more positive.

Of course, if you tried to do that, you’d never have a chance to relax and enjoy life! It’s much better to focus primarily on reframing your negative thoughts.

But if you listen to your thoughts for long enough, you’ll probably notice that there are so many negative ones that it’s still a challenge to reframe them all.

To simplify, I’ve found that there are three main types of negative thoughts that it is most helpful to reframe.

1. **Limiting beliefs.** A limiting belief is a thought that prevents you from accepting your full potential. These are the “I’m not good enough” thoughts. The consequences of accepting your limiting beliefs rather than challenging them are severe; you end up not **achieving what you want.** When you **counter a limiting belief** by reframing thoughts based on them, you weaken the belief and reduce the chance of it getting in the way of your goals.

2. **When you wish that something acceptable were better.** Have you ever had a really fun night staying in your apartment, but felt like you missed out the next day when you heard about something cool your friends had done? We tend to beat ourselves up in **these kinds of situations**, even though we had a good time! Rather than let your mind be filled with negative thoughts, take advantage of this easy reframing situation and enjoy the moment even more.
3. **Specific problem areas.** This can often be related to limiting beliefs, but doesn’t have to be. Perhaps you are working on a specific area of your life, such as wanting to lose weight. You want to go to the gym, but it’s raining out and you don’t want to get wet. In this situation, you can use reframing as a way to motivate yourself to go.

When you get down to it, reframing is more a piece of “software” that should be installed in your mind. While you might not reframe everything, you should at least be able to whenever a good situation for it arises.

**Principles Of Reframing And How To Do It**

There are a few principles to keep in mind when considering the reframing technique.

It is critical that you know and accept these principles before you start actively trying to add reframing to your personal development toolkit. A reframe is far more effective when you understand what’s going on behind the thought.

The first basic principle is that **events or situations do not have inherent meaning**; rather, you assign them a meaning based on how you interpret the event.

This can be difficult to accept, but you must. Even when something seemingly horrible happens to you, *it is only horrible because of the way you look at it.*

This is not to make light of tragedy. It’s perfectly ok to be sad when something seemingly bad occurs. That being said, even a “bad” event can be given a “good” meaning.

The second principle is that **every thought has a hidden “frame” behind it.** The frame is your underlying beliefs and assumptions that are implied by your thought.

For example, when you think “I’ll never get that promotion I want because I’m not a brown-nosed ass-killer at work”, part of the frame is that only suck-ups get promoted.

The final principle is that **there is a positive intention behind every negative thought.**

That inner voice of yours that expresses negativity is only doing so because it wants to help you in some way. That doesn’t make the thoughts right or acceptable of course, but it does mean that your inner voice is not an enemy to be resisted.

By **finding the positive intentions** behind your thoughts, you can work with your mind to find a positive reframe. That is far more effective than chastising yourself for having negative thoughts in the first place!

So, without further ado, let’s get into the actual technique of reframing. At it’s simplest, reframing involves just two steps: observing a negative thought, and then replacing it with a positive one.

**Observing Your Negative Thoughts**

If you’ve never tried to pick up on your negative thoughts before, implementing the techniques in this section will probably shock you.

Negative thoughts pop up in your mind about a gazillion times per day, often follow the same few patterns, and usually sneak by unquestioned.
It’s time to put a stop to this.

Here are a couple of ways to help you observe your negative thoughts.

1. **Keep a thought journal.** Even if you get nothing else from this article, you will be amazed at what you find out about yourself from keeping a thought journal. Keep a small notepad in your pocket or bag so it is available at all times. I’ve found that trying to take notes on my phone is too slow, but you are free to try it. Anytime you have a negative thought, write it down in your journal. This immediately stops your negative thought in its tracks. It also allows you to analyze your negative thoughts and notice the most common problem areas or limiting beliefs you should work on.

2. **The Rubber Band Technique.** This method may feel a little silly at first, but I guarantee it is one of the fastest ways to change a behavior. Wear a rubber band around your wrist. It should be tight enough that it stays on and can make a nice snap when pulled, but loose enough that it is comfortable and won’t break. Any time you have a negative thought, give the rubber band a snap. Like writing it down, this stops a negative thought in its tracks immediately, but it also conditions you to have fewer negative thoughts in the future.

For a double-whammy, use both the rubber band technique and a thought journal.

I have no scientific basis for this time frame, but doing both will likely have you performing incredibly successful reframes within just a few days.

It can be tempting to ignore this first step, but do so at your own peril. Observing your own thoughts is fundamental to being able to reframe them successfully.

**Replacing Negative Thoughts With Positive Ones**

This is the flashy part of reframing…you know, the part that all the major news channels and celebrities are talking about.

Ok, so it may not be THAT flashy, but it’s still what most people think about when they consider reframing.

Before moving on, I can’t emphasize enough the importance of the previous section. If you haven’t been observing your negative thoughts, you simply will not be as successful at replacing them.

Anyways, here are some valuable tactics to help you replace your negative thoughts with positive ones.

1. **Use milder wording.** This one is really easy, and you should start doing it immediately. Words do matter, and if your thought is worded with a more mild negative, you won’t feel as bad. For example, if you were to think “I really hate that guy”, you would feel worse than if you thought “I’m not a fan of that guy”. So go with the second one.

2. **Ask yourself: “What is the best way for me to accomplish this?”** When you are facing a challenge or fear, you can ask yourself this question to help you focus on the solution rather than the problem. The phrase “best way” implies that there are multiple ways around the problem and focuses on the positive.

3. **Ask yourself: “What can I learn from this?”** Now, instead of having a problem, you have a way to improve yourself. Every challenge is also an opportunity to learn, so take advantage of it.

4. **Challenge your assumptions.** Try to figure out what the frame behind your thought is. Chances are you have a limiting belief that is encouraging you to think negatively about your situation. This limiting belief is based on assumptions you have made that probably are not true. Find reasons why they aren’t true, and you chip away at the beliefs causing the negative thoughts. This is the most powerful long term reframing technique, and it is far more effective if you’ve been keeping a thought journal.
These techniques are like rules of thumb that you should have available for when negative thoughts rear their ugly head. They will help you come up with “band-aid” reframes in a pinch.

**Easy Reframes For Common Situations**

“We’re not retreating…we’re just advancing in a different direction!”

If you really want to succeed with this, you should figure out what your most common negative thoughts are and have a specific reframe available whenever you have that thought.

Consistently applied, you will find yourself instinctively thinking positively in situations that you had previously had horrible thoughts of.

Many of the negative thought patterns you probably experience involve a cognitive distortion, or your mind putting “spin” on the events that happen to you.

See if you can recognize any of these cognitive distortions within yourself as you go through this section.

**“People Never Listen To Me.”**

This is an example of all-or-nothing reasoning.

Another example would be “I always get things wrong.”

The key characteristic of this cognitive distortion is a word like “always” or “never”. When reframing all-or-nothing reasoning, it can be helpful to think of counter-examples.

**Reframe:** “While it’s unfortunate that this person doesn’t appreciate my idea as much as they should, many other people do. In fact, just yesterday I had a number of people agree with my proposal about ___."

**“Something Bad Is About To Happen.”**

One of the most common cognitive distortions is fortune telling, or predicting the future in a negative way.

These types of thoughts can cause serious anxiety, and need to be controlled. It can be helpful to remind ourselves that we don’t know everything and certainly don’t have the power to predict the future.

Oftentimes we make predictions that don’t come true, so why should we assume that we’ll be right this time?

**Reframe:** “I’m not sure what the future will bring, but chances are high that it will be good.”

**“Anyone Could Do What I Do.”**

This is an example of discounting the positive, or minimizing the significance of your accomplishments or something else positive in your life.

This prevents you from **savoring the moment** and can **decrease your self-confidence**.

We can’t have that! The best way to reframe this is to focus on your strengths.

**Reframe:** “I’m very good at what I do. My skillzzzz are impressive, and lots of people are probably envious.”
“Since _____ Went Wrong, Everything Will Go Wrong.”
Over-generalization is another common cognitive distortion that can wreak havoc on our minds.

Here, we take a negative situation as implying that all sorts of other unrelated negative things will happen because of it.

To counter an over-generalization, you just need to put the event in perspective by recognizing it as an isolated incident.

**Reframe:** “Although ____ went wrong, I can handle the challenge that it presents. And besides, it’s just one failure amidst many probable successes!”

“_____ Is All My Fault!”
Sometimes we like to pin the blame for something squarely on ourselves.

While you should take responsibility for yourself and your actions, you don’t need to accept blame for things that are not your fault. Chances are there were some factors beyond your control.

**Reframe:** “I contributed to the problem here, and I accept full responsibility for the part that is my fault. Never the less, there were factors beyond my control, so I can’t blame myself for everything that went wrong.”

“If Only I Had ___, Then I Could ____.”
If you find yourself having thoughts of this nature often, you have limiting beliefs that need to be handled.

Make sure you start keeping a thought journal so you can get to the bottom of it.

Your limiting belief is putting conditions on your success. Road blocks are continuously put up to keep you away from your goal, keeping it just out of reach and decreasing your motivation.

A couple examples of this type of thought would be “Once I drop ten pounds I’ll be able to get all the ladies”, “I can’t quit my [awful, boring, life-sucking] job and pursue my passion until I have more money saved up”, or “without permission from my parents I can’t get that tattoo I always wanted.”

**Reframe:** “Nothing is stopping me from achieving my goals.”

“I Can’t Handle This.”
This thought pops up usually as a response to a larger than average stressor.

You take the fact that you are experiencing something challenging, and you magnify it to the point of impossibility.

I recommend that when you have this type of thought, you pause for a moment before your reframe and do something to help reduce the stress. Take five slow, deep breaths, and then give ‘em one of these…

**Reframe:** “I’ve faced many challenges before, and I’ve conquered all of them. Not only that, but they rarely turn out to be anything significant in the grand scheme of things.”

“I’ve Been Rejected! I’m Worthless!”
The feeling of rejection can be very painful, but it need not be.

Who gets to decide what counts as rejection and what doesn’t, anyways?
When I was rejected for several jobs that I had applied for nearly a year ago, I was upset.

But were it not for those “rejections”, I wouldn’t be living it up in a foreign country right now! I couldn’t be happier to have been rejected.

Reframe: “Missing this opportunity may turn out to be a fantastic thing for me” or “I can’t take it personally; she probably was in a bad mood” or “It’s better that I tried and failed than to have not tried at all”.

**Conclusion/Summary**

So there you have it: everything you need to know about the awesome technique of reframing your thoughts. We’ve covered a lot, so a quick summary might be useful.

- Reframing involves changing your perspective on a given situation to give it a more positive or beneficial meaning to you.
- Reframing can be used to help remove limiting beliefs, to help appreciate positive moments that you might otherwise miss, or for any other negative thought you would like to change.
- Our assumptions help us provide meaning to events that don’t have any inherent meaning. Even when our inner voice has something negative to say, there is a positive intention behind it.
- The first step in reframing is to observe your negative thoughts. Keep a thought journal and use the rubber band technique to help you better understand your own internal dialogue.
- The second step is to replace the negative thoughts with a more positive one. It helps here to challenge the implied assumptions behind your thoughts.
- There are a lot of common negative thought patterns, and you can arm yourself against them in advance.

Ok, your turn. Can you think of other ways to use reframing to make your inner dialogue more positive?

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Learn simple habits that will help you create a healthy lifestyle that boosts your mood and happiness. One of the LEAST healthy things is spam, so you’ll never get any.
Joel says:
October 19, 2012 at 9:44 pm
Another nice article. Not just anyone could have written that. (Though what’s this about a tattoo?).

I’m interested to know what negative thoughts you had about starting a blog, and which if any of these strategies did you use before going for it?

Reply

Mikey D says:
October 20, 2012 at 12:54 pm
Tattoo? Just an example.

As for starting a blog, I was afraid of how much of a commitment it would be and the chance that I would invest a lot and fail. But the reality is that it’s cheap, and I enjoy the writing so it’s not really “work”. It took me some time to convince myself of this.

Reply

Jeremy says:
October 26, 2012 at 4:42 pm
Really solid article, Mike! I’ve been working on trying to reframe my thoughts for a while now, but you had a lot of really awesome insights I wouldn’t have thought of – such as every negative thought originally having a positive intention.

I really like the idea of keeping a thought journal too.

Jeremy recently posted.. The Good Times Are Killing Me

Reply

Mikey D says:
October 27, 2012 at 7:27 am
Thanks Jeremy!

Yes, I think the realization that every thought has a positive intention really helped me “get over” some of my own negative thought patterns.

Reply

Tamara says:
December 1, 2012 at 7:52 pm
I could not resist commenting. Well written!

Tamara recently posted. Tamara

Reply

quotes about happiness and laughter says:
January 5, 2013 at 11:12 am
I was recommended this web site by my cousin. I am not sure whether this post is written by him as nobody else know such detailed about my problem. You are incredible! Thanks!

quotes about happiness and laughter recently posted. quotes about happiness and laughter
Marlena Johnsen says:
January 26, 2013 at 2:11 pm

Nice post. I learn something new and challenging on blogs I stumbleupon on a daily basis. It’s always interesting to read articles from other writers and practice something from other sites.

Mikey D says:
January 28, 2013 at 11:16 am

Thanks for the kind words!

Burton Haynes says:
February 10, 2013 at 5:52 pm

Brilliant article you have written thank you so much for taking your time to do so!

Mikey D says:
February 11, 2013 at 2:09 pm

Thank you! Much appreciated.

Ade’ Singleton says:
April 17, 2013 at 3:58 pm

I’ve spent years Relearning self~Confidence, self~Love, & how to allow the process of my Sharing it with others. Growing up, those meant to protect & love starved me of the fundamentals of Confidence & self esteem. It took many years, (smiling) and mistakes, and countless self help books to learn how to Reframe my thought processing in order to see the Positives within myself and both Repattern & Redirect my creative focus on Belief in the Possibilities & Truth that not only I Can……… but I AM 😊

Mikey D says:
April 21, 2013 at 7:37 am

Yeah, there’s nothing easy or trivial about it…it can take years of practice before it’s truly internalized. That being said, every time you do a good reframe you’ll probably feel a little bit better.

amanda says:
October 5, 2013 at 7:36 am

Hi

Wonderful stuff – came at just the right moment as I was beginning to think – it’s not just isolated cases of bad luck that have been dogging me; it’s me I MUST STINK.

Put your blog-post on my site; hope you approve
http://www.amandavolley.co.uk/2013/10/reasons-to-not-be-cheerfulpart-one.html

Mikey D says:
October 5, 2013 at 10:09 am

Of course I approve, and thank you for the link! I’m glad you found the post useful.
And that’s a good point you bring up, actually. It’s easy to imagine that you have bad luck or are cursed or something along those lines when a string of bad things occur, but it’s important to remember that they are independent occurrences and you yourself are fine.

Thanks for the comment!

G says:
June 8, 2014 at 10:12 pm
Thanks for the help. I used this for a term paper. Of course, I referenced your site to ensure you received proper credit. Take care!

Reply

Mikey D says:
June 10, 2014 at 6:18 am
Oh, why thank you! Out of curiosity, what was your term paper on?

Reply

salut ron says:
August 25, 2014 at 1:50 pm
Enjoyed just of your article. Keep writing.

Reply

Mikey D says:
August 26, 2014 at 7:16 pm
Thank you! I’ll try my best to keep writing – but it’s tough while working all the time as well. Comments like yours are very encouraging though 😊

Reply

Debora says:
December 30, 2014 at 2:59 pm
Hello there! I was searching for information on reframing and happened upon your site. (If anything can be happened upon!) My New Year’s Resolution is to be more flexible, both physically and emotionally. The physical part is easy. But when I study emotional flexibility I find that there are two skills essential for emotional flexibility. The first is for low-level stress and is ‘reframing.’ The second is for higher impact situations and is ‘diverting one’s attention.’ At almost 60 years of age, I find that I am quite a ‘baby’ when it comes to both of these skills. So thanks for the great information. I’m enjoying your site and will return! Happy New Year! Debora

Reply

Mikey D says:
December 30, 2014 at 7:51 pm
Hey Debora, thanks for the comment (and the compliment)! Can you define “emotional flexibility” for me?

Also, with regards to your second tactic, you should look up Morita Therapy as sort of a counterpoint. The general idea is to just go with it – don’t fight negative feelings, just embrace it. Obviously, easier said than done. And also obviously, it’s a bit more nuanced than that. But it’s worth seeing both perspectives!

Reply

Mary Ellen says:
February 23, 2015 at 8:54 pm
I’m trying to help one of my young students “reframe” his thoughts and verbiage
about school work. Although he is very smart and enjoys the social aspects of school he is loaded with negative thoughts about doing and achieving in all academic areas. Any suggestions?

Mikey D says:
February 24, 2015 at 9:05 pm
Hi Mary Ellen! Can you give me anything more specific? What grade? Any particular kinds of thoughts and behaviors?

autisticaplanet says:
June 15, 2015 at 1:21 am
Hello. I found this in a search for reducing anxiety techniques. I found your information interesting. I am wondering if I can use reframing to help me with the overwhelmingly negative thoughts & high anxiety I experience as someone with Asperger Syndrome. There has been much anger, rejection and trauma in my life, the bulk since my teens (I am 35). There has been improvement, esp. in the last 5 years. My biggest angst is fear of losing control when I get into sensory overload and harming myself or others. This has happened numerous times in the past, so I have reason to worry.

autisticaplanet recently posted.. S is for Stop Saying Savant Syndrome and Splinter Skills

Abe says:
July 14, 2015 at 11:20 pm
A great article. I appreciate you taking the time to put it together. I’m working on a video on this topic and I find that your ideas are helpful in teaching people how to use it. It’s really a simple technique but can be challenging to apply personally on their own. I help people with it as a coach, so this helps to give people a tool they can use.

Cheers!

Abe recently posted.. How To Use Mistakes To Supercharge Your Learning

ann shea says:
September 4, 2015 at 12:16 am
Found your blog through a search on reframing thoughts. It’s easy to get caught up in frustration at the traffic, Comcast (LOL or AT&T), bills, or computers that go wonkers. Then I remember kids in mine-laded fields that have lost parents and their limbs and I’m checked on my level of discontent. Just saw Hector and the Search for Happiness (2014) and recommend it to others. Keep sharing positive thoughts, and helping us gain perspective.

ann shea recently posted..

Mikey D says:
September 4, 2015 at 7:00 am
Thanks Ann! I’d never heard of Hector and the Search for Happiness, so thanks for the recommendation!

Carly Banks says:
November 5, 2015 at 6:09 pm
LOVE this!!! so down to earth and ready to use advice, keep it coming!
Thanks Carly! I appreciate the compliment!

Reply

Kartic says:
February 29, 2016 at 2:52 am
Thank you for such a lovely and amazing blog Mikey D. You have gone in great depth and not stopped at highlighting the causes but also given very practical tips for handling these. Really grateful for this masterpiece of an article.

Reply

Mikey D says:
February 29, 2016 at 7:20 am
Thank you, Kartic!

Reply

Lynn says:
June 2, 2016 at 12:05 am
Thank you for your words and writing’s. My ex partner and his two children left after a very difficult time in our relationship, leaving my son (who has autism) and I in total distraugh, and even though the children had been raised has brothers and sister he has cut off all communication even to the point of not taking their belongings. For the last four months I have blamed myself for everything that happened as I am going through the menopause and have felt at times that sanity has not been on my side as I have done and said things that are totally out of character for me. I have replayed in my mind many times over these events and grown a hatred of myself. Your words of take responsibility for my actions but it was not all my fault caused an inner peace to come over me for the first time. I will be using your reframing for some time to come. By the way I stumbled across your site and am so thankful that I did. Thank you.

Reply

Mikey D says:
June 2, 2016 at 10:06 am
I’m very sorry to hear about your situation; that must have been really difficult. I’m glad this article was helpful to you, though. Things will continue to get better!

Reply

Trackbacks

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internal locus of control says:
January 15, 2013 at 4:00 pm

[...] feelings. What I am saying is that we are the ones who control our own thoughts, and we are free to interpret a situation any way we want. I’m sure if Buddha were trapped in a cage, he would still feel [...] 
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A Taste Of Bliss says:
February 20, 2013 at 3:28 pm

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March 18, 2013 at 12:59 pm

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April 7, 2013 at 7:43 am

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October 3, 2013 at 4:45 pm

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[...]
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megabroblog says:
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