

The One-Two Punch of Negativity and Fear: Why What You Believe Determines What You Feel and How to Change It

Leigh was a wreck. She had googled her symptoms and came up with a diagnosis over the internet. Her memory problems had to be early onset Alzheimer's. And she immediately became frantic with fear. The diagnosis meant a future in which she was increasingly crazy, losing the love of family and friends, and ending up homeless or institutionalized.

Her fear and negativity reminded me of how often people with depression do not recognize a simple principle: things that seem true are not always true.

When I was a young therapist I learned – surprise! – that you can believe things that are not true. (The corollary: believing something does *not* make it true.) In depression, false beliefs, such as you are worthless or nothing will work out or you are doomed to fail, direct your thoughts, your emotions, and even your physical feelings. It is even worse when the depressing beliefs also spark fear. Fear will trigger symptoms like anxiety, nausea or diarrhea, or increased heart-rate. (People experience both anxiety and depression about 50% of the time.)

Leigh's situation, feeling fear and unable to shake it, was a frightening lesson in the importance of what you tell yourself. It doesn't matter that what you believe is false: *it matters that you believe it*. Then you react as if the belief is true.

When you have a depressed/anxious brain, the chances are good that you are low on several brain neurotransmitters, causing negativity that is hard to slow down. Negativity plus fear is a powerful combination that will reinforce itself rapidly. Your brain will form a neurobiological rut that is hard to get out of.

But you are not unconscious! You can consciously climb out of that mental rut. The problem is that this is HARD to do. It requires both the conviction that your thoughts are unnecessary and the motivation to do what is difficult. You may need an outside boost to see how to get out of the rut, such as:

- a person who will remind you of your goals
- written reminders of your desired thoughts (to replace the undesired thoughts)
- a ding from your handheld device to prompt you to think the positive thought.

In Leigh's case, she also needed a reliable person to tell her the fears she had were unfounded. (Hint: *the internet is not a good place to look for relief of fear*.)

To handle the one-two punch of negativity and fear, seek *right* reassurance. Right reassurance involves getting correct information to get rid of fear. But beware of TMI – *too much information* – that usually makes it worse. You need another person to be a helper who knows something about what you fear, and who is able to offer you the following:

1. Careful listening for what caused the fear and then specifically telling you why your fear is unfounded. (For example, “No, that kind of rash is NOT a sign of flesh-eating bacteria.”)
2. Self-control to not tell you extra information. You only need their certainty that you don’t need to fear, but very little more than that. (You do not want to hear what kind of rash *would* be a sign of flesh-eating bacteria.)
3. Ability to help you find the positive thought to replace your fearful one. Pick a positive statement that is *both true and believable*. For example, “I will do my best and that is good enough,” is a better choice than “I cannot fail,” which might not be believable to you.

In the example of Leigh’s fear of early onset Alzheimer’s, she would not benefit from hearing she is too young for that. Fear and negativity would drive her to wonder if she is going to be the rare exception. Rather, in Step 1 her helper would listen to why she fears she is developing Alzheimer’s. In Step 2 her helper would tell her firmly that her symptoms are not signs of that disorder but would NOT discuss what signs do indicate early onset. In Step 3 Leigh’s positive thought replacement for the fearful thought might be, “My worry is unnecessary. I am fine as I am.”

Getting out of your rut of fear is not easy. Don’t expect of yourself to do it alone. And do not hesitate to seek help. The faster you act to reduce your fear, the easier it will be to bounce back from the one-two punch of negativity and fear