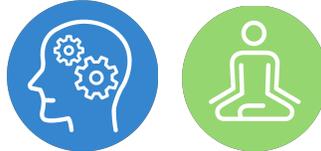


BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Brain Healthy Lifestyle: Reframing — Thoughts and Words Really DO Matter

We are all adjusting to our new reality. Workers who are deemed essential, who leave their homes and families every day, are focusing on fact over fear while doing their jobs (**and all of you have our heartfelt gratitude for what you are doing**). Those of us working from home, attending school from home, or just safer at home, may be struggling to find normalcy in this new reality. How we perceive this new reality (thoughts) and how we communicate (words) our perception matters to our brain and body health.

According to the Brain Health Initiative's Dr. Shelley Carson, a lecturer in the department of psychology at Harvard University, the first line of resilience in the face of COVID-19 is to creatively *reframe* our reality. Both the stress we experience psychologically, as anxiety, and the stress we experience physically, as increased heart rate, can take a toll on our body and brain health. By reframing our situation from a *threat* into a *challenge*, we can increase our brain health and daily functioning while reducing brain illness associated with stress.

Our natural tendency is to avoid threats and to pursue challenges. Research indicates that perceiving stressors as *threats* activates a brain harmful stress response — increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, and avoidance orientation. Perceiving them instead, as *challenges* activates a brain adaptive physiological stress response that is much healthier.

Reframing empowers us. It helps us to focus on positive thoughts, behaviors, and words. It transforms us from being a *victim* of a threatening situation into an *agent* in control of our circumstances. This sense of control helps us experience fewer brain illness symptoms of anxiety and depression. It also decreases perceived stress and illness. Reframing our challenges can be a simple and powerful way to improve our mood and even boost our energy. For example, instead of thinking an automatic negative thought (ANT) and saying, "I am stuck at home," a reframed statement using a more positive automatic thought (PAT) would be, "I am safer at home."

How many of us have thought, heard, or maybe even said some of these sentiments? *This is never going to end. This is a living nightmare. I feel imprisoned. We are all going to die. I feel like I can't breathe. The sky is falling around us. The world will never be the same again.* It sounds catastrophic and pretty dramatic, right? These sentiments are striking and understandable. Many of our lives have been turned upside down amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and it's tempting to think and say as much. But the thoughts we have and the words we use matter more than we know.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

- Pay attention to what you think and what you say, be mindful of your thoughts and words.
- Automatic negative thoughts (ANTs) come easily. If you catch yourself thinking or saying a striking, dramatic statement — stop, pause, and breathe.
- Challenge the truth of the dramatic, catastrophic thoughts and statements.
 - For the most part, the catastrophic, dramatic thoughts you have and statements you make, like, “I am being held captive in my own home,” are not true. Humans are strong and resilient, and you can handle much more than you think.
 - Take a moment to acknowledge your strength by thinking of something challenging through which you have persisted in your past.
 - Immediately remind yourself what is true and use more positive automatic thoughts (PATS) and words to reframe the situation.
 - For example, try reframing your current “COVID-19 Captivity” situation. Focus on being safer-at-home. Instead of focusing on being **stuck** at home (ANT), focus on how you are helping the situation. Remind yourself that you are strong and have overcome a lot and that you can handle this (PAT)!
 - Fact: The virus is spread by social contact and by staying at home, you can reduce the severity of the outbreak. Your mission, your challenge, is to reduce exposure by practicing social distancing and ensuring your family stays positive and practices personal hygiene. Every day that you do this you are contributing to the defeat of the outbreak.
- Practice replacing automatic negative thoughts (ANTs) and words with more realistic, optimistic, and positive(PATs) alternatives. Be patient, it takes practice to change a habit and ANTS are a habit that can be replaced with PATS. The more you practice the easier it will be to think, act and speak more positively.
- Spread your PATS not your ANTS, they are both contagious.

Reframing what we think and say doesn't mean pretending things aren't hard. But whenever possible, it is important to be mindful of the thoughts we have and the language we're using — for our own brain health and well-being, and for those around us. It takes practice to change habits, so be patient. Knowing that we *can* make a shift in the way we think and express ourselves from ANTS to PATS, is empowering.

Let's make it a brain health challenge to think more positive automatic thoughts (PATs) and to find other words in our vocabulary that will be more uplifting. The more we do it, the more we will find it helps us protect our brain health. Staying calm and even optimistic has a ripple effect on those around us. How we think and our choice of words can offer much-needed support to whoever we are talking to, whether it's our partner, child, parent, a colleague, friend, or the person checking out our groceries. Brain health matters and our thoughts and words make a difference.

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to promoting brain health and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. Through education, research, innovation and action the collaboration between Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance intends to build brain healthy communities with cultures that increase brain health protective factors and reduce risk factors, improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Gulf Coast region and beyond. Join the movement, lifestyle makes a difference.

To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).