

Acknowledging and strategies for neutralising negative thoughts

COVID-19, is this just the pandemic that keeps on giving? Australia is still grappling with new infections and in Victoria, multiple record-breaking days around community transmission have resulted in Stage 4 physical distancing restrictions. As a nation, we appear to be resilient and tough, and it appears that most of us are doing the right thing for ourselves and others. Many people report that their emotions are mixed when it comes to the pandemic because they are grateful to have a home to work from, food to eat and (for the lucky ones) a job to keep them employed and engaged.

Mental health professionals often view and describe emotions from a fluid point of view rather than a clear positive or negative standpoint. This viewpoint tends to mean that we move from seeing emotions as good or bad, and see them as appropriate and relevant because we are experiencing them. The big message in today's personal tool is that we are all going to have feelings about COVID-19 and a great coping strategy is to name them. Naming our feelings means we do not judge, deny or reject them. This means that if you are experiencing both positive and negative emotions about COVID-19 at the moment (and let's be realistic, who isn't?) – it is ok. Negative feelings and emotions have their place, but they should not dominate our worldview, working style or communication approach. Often when we take a step back and review our day, we can see that there are spikes in our negative emotions that may correlate with stressful news, emails or events but that they were mixed up with positive ones too (think care package delivery from a friend, text from a family member and praise from a colleague). Negative emotions do not turn off positive ones but merely blend in with them and neutralise their effect. Thinking this, it may mean that during the days of the pandemic, it's not all doom and gloom.

Clinicians often report that when discussing negative emotions and what they observe with their clients – they very rarely see pure negative emotions. What is more common is feelings of low mood, being overwhelmed, frustrated, unheard and uncertainty. Clients report that they often can still get out of bed, eat, drink coffee and walk even we they are stressed, worried or troubled by events and people around them.

At present, very few of us are living our most normal life, and you would be excused for thinking that most of us would only be experiencing negative thoughts. However, when we talk to family, friends and colleagues, they often report that they are fine. This does not suggest that they are jumping for joy, but they are coping and somehow getting on with it. This could be evidence that what we are experiencing now is a mixed emotion to the situation, not just a negative one.



Top tips on neutralising any (normal) negative thoughts that you have:

- Set some goals that you can complete in lockdown/isolation and quarantine
- Review and build your resilience
- Build a self-care plan (and stick to it) that involves activities that both distract and restore you
- Look at your feelings of being deflated as normal, appropriate and temporary
- Change is inevitable and hard. Do the changes one step at a time
- Reduce black and white thinking and open up the windows of your mind (like you would your house when it gets stuffy)
- Review any inflexible thought patterns around creating or making change, develop a what can I learn about myself attitude?
- Reading news headlines and broadcasts sporadically throughout the day and looking for the helpers within the stories.

With our worlds turned upside down with new COVID safe work practices dominating how we work, travel and live, perhaps a little neutralising of our thoughts can go a long way. When we do start to observe our negative thoughts, we can see that there is some room to view things differently and with an open mind. This may be some welcome good news for our mental health in a space that has had little of that since the pandemic started.

Remember, as your EAP, we are here to support you whatever the nature of your concerns. For a confidential conversation with one of our experienced clinical professionals, please contact **AccessEAP** on **1800 818 728**.

