

## Dealing with Negativity and Learning to Counter Negative Thoughts

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Dealing with any kind of loss, trauma, or grief can inevitably lead to negative thoughts and a general feeling of negativity – for survivors of sexual violence, that sense of negativity can be even stronger as it can be hard for some of us to find a space to express our feelings and talk about our thoughts. Feeling isolated, silenced, or ignored can make it very hard to move forward with positivity into healing, and healing without a feeling of positivity can be quite painful and frustrating. Part of healing is learning to embrace the good in your life despite the bad, and learning to control your own present, rather than feel controlled by it – if you are caught in negativity it can really slow this process down or even stall it.

For somebody who has been raped or sexually abused, their perception of the world has been blown apart. The world they thought was safe and predictable has been proven to be the opposite, the trust they felt they could believe in towards their loved ones and friends, and even general man-kind, has also been crushed. And after all this destruction of their perception of the world, they must then face the healing journey where more pain and betrayal can ensue. It's very understandable that a person surviving all of this might find it very difficult to see the good things left in the world and in the people around them. It's also very understandable that they may feel stuck in this point of their healing, and not be able to see a way out. Part of healing though is learning to take that negativity and process it, thereby turning it into something manageable and approachable instead of something that is overwhelming each and every day.

Some things that may lead survivors to feeling negative about themselves, other people, or their healing include the following – bear in mind this is certainly not an exhaustive list:

- Triggers, flashbacks, and nightmares.
- Trying your best to do something and feeling that you have failed.
- At some points, looking at the past in therapy and journaling about what happened.
- Feeling that you have been wronged in some way, or unfairly treated.

- Feeling that you have missed out on something – perhaps romantic and non-romantic relationships, a certain kind of lifestyle, a sense of being carefree, what you had expected to do with your life, and so on.
- Seeing people have certain things in their lives unfold with success, when you don't feel they deserve it (for example, finding out your rapist has a loving family to go home to every day, a great job, etc).
- Worrying that others are thinking badly of you.

What you have survived in your past is of course incredibly traumatic. It makes much sense that talking about it, and processing it might lead to feelings of negativity which may feel overwhelming and perhaps lead you to wonder if healing is worth it if it brings up so many painful thoughts, but there is one particular saying that can definitely be applied to the healing process: "no pain, no gain". What we have been through hurt, like crazy, and it can hurt to relive it as we heal, but after that pain has been processed and its power over us diminished, you have the opportunity to reclaim yourself and the person you want to be, which is a lot harder to achieve if you allow the past to pull you down into negative thoughts and hopelessness.

Some negative thoughts and feelings you may have might include:

- Feeling as though your life has been hard enough already and it's not fair that you have to deal with the other stressors that naturally crop up in life
- You might feel overwhelmed by life and unable to cope with it.
- You may want to limit your world to only what you feel comfortable with, so you won't have to face the fear and potential negativity that can come when you are challenged beyond what you know.
- It might be difficult to create bonds with other people, because you are so sure they won't love you or will leave you when they see what you are "really like".
- You may feel that you are dumb, unattractive, boring, not worthwhile, a failure, not good enough and more.
- You may feel like there is no way your life will ever get any better.
- You may feel like nobody will ever be able to understand what your experience has been like, leaving you feeling isolated and alone.

- You might not believe people when they say they are there for you, because as far as you are concerned there is nothing there to bring people back to care about you and make an effort.

All of these negative thoughts can cumulate into a revolving cycle: the negativity can feed your anxiety and fears, leading to more bad thoughts about how you “aren’t good enough”, leading to more negativity! It really is a vicious cycle that replays over and over in your mind. The good news is that even when negativity feels overwhelming and hopeless, there is a way to halt this cycle and form a new one.

Coping with negativity can take many forms. You may find you just want to crawl into bed and stay there; you may want to use alcohol, drugs, or self-injury to “get rid of” the feeling of being overwhelmed. Perhaps you find yourself taking out your anger and negativity on people you encounter in your life, or maybe you don’t push yourself to try new things or strive to achieve because you don’t believe you will ever do a good job. You may find yourself automatically thinking the worst of people when they haven’t done anything to cause you to feel this way. These of course are just a few of the feelings you might encounter – you yourself can probably name many more!

Some things survivors can find helpful in processing their negativity include:

- Acknowledging and accepting negative thoughts instead of berating yourself for having them.
- Remembering that this negativity is really just a bad tape put into your head, a tape maybe that was left behind by the people who have hurt you, and not a representation of the truth of what the world is like. A bad tape can be stopped.
- Telling yourself that it's alright to have them, and they need to be unearthed and processed to be healed.
- Writing about them, in both fiction or non-fiction forms.
- Becoming involved in volunteering or some kind of work that leaves you fulfilled and satisfied, and aware that despite what you have found yourself thinking, there is good in the world.
- Using the subconscious mind to dialogue with them, or using visualisation exercises to process them.

- Using creative outlets to heal their power over you, such as reading healing quotes, making a healing collage from magazine pictures about your feelings, reading, listening to healing music, and so on.
- Reminding yourself of all the reasons why those negative thoughts may not be true – for example, remembering I am loved; reading old emails, cards, texts, and so on from my support system; challenging feelings that I am a failure with reality, such as what you have achieved in your education, work, family, etc.
- Challenging your negative thoughts. If you are feeling negative about something, push yourself to think about why that is, where the feeling is really coming from, and if your thoughts are rational given what you know logically about whatever the issue is. Consider times in the past when you thought negatively about a similar situation, only to be proved wrong later on when whatever it was turned out to be just fine.
- When you feel abandoned by friends, it can help to remind yourself that while you may be the central person in your life, your friends have other people (including themselves) to worry about, not just you, and the fact that they haven't returned your call or visited does not necessarily mean that they don't like you or think you are a bad person.
- Using exercise and physical activity to feel comfortable and powerful within yourself.
- Reaching out to friends and your support network, such as friends, therapists, online groups and so on, and working through what you are feeling with them.
- Reminding yourself that what you are feeling is valid, and it is a symptom of the pain you have been through. It's nothing to feel ashamed of or embarrassed about, but you do deserve to live a life free from it regardless.
- Use affirmations or meditation to reflect on your feelings, your worth, and why whatever the negativity you are dealing with is saying, it is false.

Dealing with negativity can feel incredibly overwhelming at times, and it's very understandable that the temptation to let the negativity wash over you and take hold can be strong. All of us though deserve to live a life that is filled with love, hope, and light – it is of course natural that at times negativity will intrude, as it does for every single person on this planet, but you don't deserve to live a life that is filled with negativity at the expense of happiness and love. Many survivors find as they have continued to work on their healing, the power their negativity has had over them has diminished, and their ability to push that negativity to the side by challenging it and calling it out for what it truly is increases. It is

not something that happens easily or even quickly, but it is possible to move forward. When you feel negative, ask yourself, what exactly is this negativity achieving for me? Negativity is something that cannot be changed for you by another person - it is something you need to do yourself. While negativity can feel like an endless black-hole at some points in our lives, there is certainly a path for each of us to move through it, to a life that is filled more with light than it is with shadows.

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