

## **How to Let Go of Negative Self-Judgments** by Ronald A. Alexander, Ph.D.

Adapted from Dr. Ronald Alexander's new book, *Wise Mind, Open Mind: Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss, and Change* (New Harbinger Publications, 2009).

Many people cling to the myth that those who are successful inevitably feel good about themselves and are free from self-doubt and insecurities. I've worked with many clients whose résumés, personal achievements, and reputations garner the deepest respect and admiration, yet their negative self-talk is often utterly brutal. Despite their low opinion of themselves, they've managed to fashion lives that many would envy. Yet the disconnection between their inner feelings about themselves and their outer success causes them to hold back from making changes that would lead to far greater fulfillment and peace of mind. They'll remain in a stagnant situation until change is thrust upon them, and then feel overwhelmed by any crises that occur.

### **The Destructive Power of Negative Self-Judgments**

No matter how accomplished we are, no matter how happy we may seem, we all hold on to negative self-judgments, and they hold on to us. They prevent us from discovering our power to change our lives for the better. When we switch to more positive thought patterns, crisis stops being overwhelming, and it's far easier to let go of resistance, tune in to our passions and inner resources, and move forward with confidence.

Positive thinking is indeed powerful, but don't hold yourself to unrealistic standards and expect to quickly transform what are often lifelong thinking habits. The object is to stop assigning meaning to these self-judgments, because once you start to give them weight, they begin to weigh you down. Through the practice of mindfulness, you can learn to notice when you are tearing yourself down and begin to change your habit of self-criticism.

## The Stories the Mind Spins

Often, the rational mind will string together a series of distortions. Instead of simply noticing “I am shy,” the mind will generate the thought, “I’m shy, which is why I’ll never find a romantic partner; my shyness makes me unattractive.” Another example might be someone who is out going spinning a disempowering story: “I’m an extrovert. My mother never liked that about me, and it seemed to embarrass my siblings. I probably made a fool of myself many times. I am too eager to connect to other people, who look down on me for being emotionally needy.” You may not even be fully aware that you’re embellishing your self-judgments in an unwholesome way.

### Reframe Your Negative Self-Judgments

Through mindfulness practice and self-inquiry, you can render any negative self-judgments neutral and even see them in a far different light. To be “self-centered,” focused on resolving inner conflicts, can be perceived as negative, but it’s very important at times to direct your attention to yourself and your needs. If you feel that you are “callous,” you might reframe that quality as “courageous” or “bold.” If you see yourself as “weak,” consider thinking of yourself as someone who is sensitive to others’ feelings.

Here are some steps to help you mindfully reframe an unwholesome self-judgment that you know is of no use to you and that causes you anguish. It is beneficial to use a journal to work through each step.

1. *Identity and label the judgment.* Give it a simple name or theme, such as “inadequate provider,” “insincere,” or “people pleaser.”
2. *Discover the quality of the judgment.* Ask yourself, “What is this self-judgment causing me to think or feel about myself in this moment?” Does it make you feel ashamed, angry, or guilty, for example? Notice whether the feeling is wholesome and supportive of your well-being, or unwholesome, making it difficult for you to enter a state of spaciousness, openness, and trust.

3. *Find a remedy for the unwholesome thought or feeling.* Ask yourself, “Would I like to think or feel something different? What thought or feeling could I generate to shift myself out of this unwholesome state?”

4. *Formulate a new thought, image, or feeling, and begin to hold on to it firmly.* Experience it in your mind’s eye and in your body. Feel a wholesome sensation, such as relaxation, excitement, or expansiveness.

5. *Assess whether you’ve shifted.* Ask yourself, “Have I shifted out of the feeling, state, or thought that was unwholesome and let go of my negative self-judgment?” If you have, then enjoy the new sensations, feelings, and thoughts you’ve generated as a remedy. If not, go back and repeat steps 1 through 4.

You may never totally rid yourself of your unwholesome self-judgments. However, you can alter their quality, learn from them, and either let them go or transform them so that they no longer block you from a sense of well-being, a feeling of spaciousness, and openness to new possibilities. Hidden gold will appear when you let go of your negative-judgments. The aspects of yourself you’ve been overlooking will ascend to your consciousness. Through mindfulness, you can discover these forgotten qualities that will inspire and vitalize you, and carry you through the rough waters of criticism to more placid waters.

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