

overcoming biased expectations

Biased Expectations

Biased expectations are negative thoughts that commonly occur when you encounter an 'At-Risk Situation' that is, when it looks likely that your unhelpful rules or assumptions will be broken and hence your negative core beliefs have been activated. When this happens, you will tend to make predictions about how things will turn out and these predictions often tend to be negative and lead to feelings of anxiety.

You will tend to:

- Overestimate the likelihood that bad things will happen
- Exaggerate how bad things will be
- Underestimate your ability to deal with things if they don't go well
- Ignore other factors in the situation, which suggest that things will not be as bad as you are predicting.

For example, someone with the negative core belief "I am stupid" might then have the rule "I must never let others see my true abilities". So when encountering the at-risk situation of attending a quiz night with friends, their biased expectations might be "I'll make the team lose" or "The others won't want me on the team", and hence they will feel quite anxious.

Challenging Biased Expectations

One way to address biased expectations is to challenge them 'head on.' **Remember that our thoughts and expectations are often opinions we have picked up or learned, rather than facts.** They can be questioned, and should not be something we just blindly accept if they are causing us distress.

To challenge your biased expectations means that you dissect them, evaluate how accurate or likely they are, examine what evidence you base your expectations on, and look at any positive things you may be ignoring. In this way, you are like a detective or lawyer, trying to get to the facts of how realistic your expectations are, and putting things in perspective.



Challenging your biased expectations isn't something you should do in your head as this can get messy and confusing. The best way is to write it down. To help you through the challenging process step by step, we suggest using the worksheet *Thought Diary for Biased Expectations*.

Using a thought diary will help you develop more **realistic expectations** and a decrease in the intensity of your negative emotions, particularly anxiety. Notice that your biased expectations and negative emotions will probably not disappear totally by using a thought diary, but it will make them more manageable so you can approach situations with an open mind, try new things, and often be pleasantly surprised by what you find, instead of letting your negative opinion of yourself constantly restrict how you live your life.

Experimenting with Biased Expectations

When we expect negative things of ourselves and our abilities, we will act accordingly and either **avoid** the situation totally, try the situation but **escape** when things are too overwhelming, or be overly cautious and engaged in **safety behaviours** to help get us through (e.g., taking a friend, over-preparing to face the situation, taking medication to cope or placing certain conditions on approaching the situation - such as turning up/leaving early). We do this to protect ourselves, but ultimately it is unhelpful and makes things worse because we never test our predictions to see how accurate they are.

The next step to overcoming biased expectations is to be like a scientist and conduct an experiment to test how true our predictions are. The point of experimenting with our biased expectations is to stop avoiding, escaping and using safety behaviours, and instead to start approaching situations and see if what we expect actually eventuates. Sounds scary I know, but when planned and done properly, this can be a powerful way of overcoming our biased expectations. As with a Thought Diary, there are some steps you have to work through to properly experiment with your biased expectations, and these are shown on the worksheet *Experimenting with Biased Expectations*.



The aim of both Challenging and Experimenting with your biased expectations is to develop more realistic expectations of yourself. By making more realistic predictions in your day-to-day life, you will think and act differently, in a manner inconsistent with someone with low self-esteem. Behaving in a manner that is inconsistent with your low opinion of yourself, is the path to overcoming this negative opinion. When you do this, you will start to gather new information about yourself, which will allow you to see yourself in a less harsh, more positive and capable light.