

behavioural experiments negative predictions

Negative Predictions

Many people who suffer from anxiety, depression or low self-esteem tend to make negative predictions about how certain situations will turn out. You may tend to:

- Overestimate the likelihood that bad things will happen or that something will go wrong
- 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

When you jump to such negative conclusions about the future, you will tend to engage in unhelpful behaviours. You may tend to:

- Avoid** the situation totally
- Try the situation out but **escape** when things seem too difficult
- Be overly cautious and engage in **safety behaviours** (see worksheet Biology+Psychology of Panic)

The problem with these strategies is that they prevent you from actually testing out your predictions. This makes it very hard for you to ever have a different experience from what you expected, so you continue to expect the worst.



For example, let us imagine you have been invited to a BBQ and your negative prediction is: "I will have a terrible time, no-one will speak to me, I will feel like a total fool."

Your usual response may be to either avoid the BBQ altogether, or to attend but to leave as soon as you feel uncomfortable, or to stand in the corner and speak only to one person you already know. This may help you reduce your discomfort in the short term, but it also contributes to the continuation of your negative predictions, and this means continuation of anxieties.

Testing Our Predictions

What could have been an alternative way to handle the BBQ situation described above?

A different approach could be to go to the BBQ, try your best to have a nice time and speak to others, and use the resulting experience as evidence to test your original negative prediction. **Think of yourself as a scientist, putting your thoughts under the microscope to examine the evidence for and against your thoughts**, instead of assuming that all of your negative predictions are true. Behavioural experiments are a good way for testing these predictions. Next we will go through the steps, using the BBQ situation as an example.



Planning your Behavioural Experiment

1. Be clear about the purpose of the experiment - the point is to test out your negative predictions and help you to develop more realistic and/or balanced predictions.

2. What is the thought or belief that you are trying to test? Rate how strongly you believe this prediction (0-100)
I will have a terrible time at the BBQ. Even if I try to talk to people, no-one will talk to me. (90)

3. What is an alternative prediction or belief? Rate how strongly you believe this alternative (0-100)
I will find at least one person to talk to and will have an ok time. (10)

4. Design the actual experiment - what will you do to test your prediction, when will you do it, how long will it take, and with whom? Try to be as specific as possible. There are no boundaries to how creative you can be, and it is ok to ask for help.

I will go to the BBQ at 8pm, alone, and will stay for at least one hour. I will try to make conversation with at least three people, one that I did not know already. I will only drink one glass of wine.

5. Make sure you set your experiment at an appropriate level. It is best to start simply and increase the challenge step-by-step.

Identify likely problems and how to deal with them.

There might not be anyone I know at the BBQ. But I will at least know the host and I can ask to be introduced to some other people.



Evaluating your Behavioural Experiment

1. Carry out the experiment as planned. Remember to take notice of your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

2. Write down what happened, what did you observe? Consider the evidence *for* and *against* your original prediction. What did this say about your negative prediction

I felt quite nervous at first and wanted to leave. I used breathing to calm myself. The host was friendly and seemed happy to talk to me, and I also spoke to Kelly, who I hadn't seen in some time. Kelly introduced me to her partner Jim and we had a good chat about travel. At one point I worried I had said something stupid, but Jim didn't seem to notice so my worry passed.

3. What have you learned?
I am capable of making conversation and enjoying myself in a casual social situation.

4. Rate how strongly you now believe in your original prediction and the alternative (0-100)
I will have a terrible time at the BBQ. Even if I try to talk to people, no-one will talk to me. (10)
I will find at least one person to talk to and will have an ok time. (80)