

Whenever we feel strong emotions – such as fear, sadness, shame, or hopelessness – we’ve often just had an *automatic thought*. These thoughts can happen so quickly and effortlessly that we’re not even aware we’ve had them. It can take practice to notice them as they arise. Automatic thoughts often feel convincing, but they are not always 100% accurate.

They are often *exaggerated, biased, distorted, or unrealistic*. There are different types of biases, which psychologists call *cognitive distortions* or *unhelpful thinking styles*. We all think in exaggerated ways sometimes, but it can become a problem if your thoughts are distorted very often or very strongly.

Disqualifying the positive is a style of thinking where you ignore, dismiss, or discount your positive attributes and experiences. For instance, receiving positive feedback might feel strange or uncomfortable to you, so you automatically reject it. Alternatively, you might discount how safe and protected you are, focusing only on the awful things that could happen. Unfortunately, disqualifying the positive stops you learning from experience and having a balanced perspective. Most importantly, it makes it difficult (or impossible) to change the negative beliefs you hold.



Disqualifying the positive is common across a wide range of problems:

- Anxiety
- Body dysmorphic disorder
- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Obsessive compulsive disorder
- Perfectionism
- Phobias
- Relationship problems

Overcoming disqualifying the positive

Noticing and labeling

The first step in overcoming disqualifying the positive is catching it. Practice self-monitoring so that you get better at noticing these thoughts as they arise. When you notice one, say something to yourself like:

- “I’m disqualifying the positive again.”
- “There’s another disqualifying thought.”



Weigh up the pros and cons

Make a list of advantages and disadvantages of disqualifying the positives. Ask yourself:

- What problems has disqualifying the positives caused me in the past?
- What problems might disqualifying the positives lead to in the future?
- How would things change me if I learned to accept the positives?
- Is disqualifying the positive consistent with my hopes for the future and goals in life?



Count the positives

Get in the habit of noticing your positive attributes and experiences. For instance, you could start a daily log for recording your positives. If you find counting the positives difficult:

- Write them down, even though you don’t fully believe them (yet!).
- Pretend you are someone who appreciates your positives while you do your log.
- Record the positives you think would ‘count’ for someone you cared about.



Accept the positives

Experiment with changing how you respond to positive things. For instance:

- If you discount compliments, try saying ‘thank you’ next time.
- If you discount positive experiences, start a daily gratitude journal.
- If you discount your talents, ask for, and accept, positive feedback about them.

