

Thinking Strategies

# Thinking Strategies

The Productive Leader  
*Releasing time to lead™*





## Thinking Strategies: introduction

This module is about using various thinking strategies to deal with different situations. It explores different models of thinking to help you deal more effectively with:

- information processing
- communicating and influencing
- emotional intelligence and stress management
- problem solving and idea generation.

Understanding thinking processes can also help you manage the pressures your colleagues may experience. They may be unable to change the job they are doing, but they will always have the choice of how to approach it. These models provide that choice.

Theories developed within the approaches of cognitive behavioural therapy, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and emotional intelligence show that by managing our thinking, it is possible to achieve goals, be more successful, stay healthy and enjoy a renewed passion for life.

## Your objectives

To get the most from this module, it is helpful to focus on some key personal objectives.

List three things you would like to gain from this programme:

1

2

3

In what ways do you think this programme could help you enhance your team leadership skills?

In what ways do you think this programme could benefit your organisation as a whole?

How would you need to think, feel and act in order to achieve these objectives?

Think

Feel

Act

## This module is divided into three topics

1. Understand how your brain works

2. Direct your thinking

3. Transform negative to positive

# Understanding how your brain works

- Attitudes to the brain
- Looking inside the brain
- Left and right-brain thinking
- Healthy brain choices



## What research tells us

Developing an understanding of how your brain works helps you to practise different thinking strategies. Neuroscientists say 95% of the knowledge of how the brain works has been discovered in the last 10 years.

- Research into how the brain works has given us a greater opportunity to understand why we think as we do, and why we respond to situations in certain ways. The first step towards controlling our responses is to recognise patterns. These could include why we get bored at *some* meetings, angry with *particular* people and frustrated with *certain* directives.
- Techniques required to improve your memory, manage stress, communicate with others and become more creative, are developed in more detail in other modules in this programme. They all recognise that our brains are 'plastic' and it is possible to change the way we use them.

Recent studies into the brain found that the hippocampus and corpus callosum are bigger in taxi drivers than the rest of the population. The hippocampus determines spatial awareness and the corpus callosum joins the two hemispheres together. It would seem that our brains alter shape when we carry out certain tasks. This plasticity means you can change the way you think at any stage in your life.

Source: E A Maguire, Richard Frackowiak, and Christopher D Frith, 1997 and 2000

## Attitudes to the brain have changed over time

Egyptians in 1500 BC removed and discarded the brain.  
They did not see it as a vital organ worthy of mummification.

Corporate vice president (1976): *'The human brain is a highly personal and private matter, not to be discussed in public, and certainly not talked about on company property.'*

US school headteacher (1979): *'We have enough problems running this school and teaching these kids without complicating our lives with all this brain stuff.'*

Chief executive (1987): *'The key resource has always been the minds of the people in our organisation. It is high time that we begin to factor the brain into our management of this key resource.'*

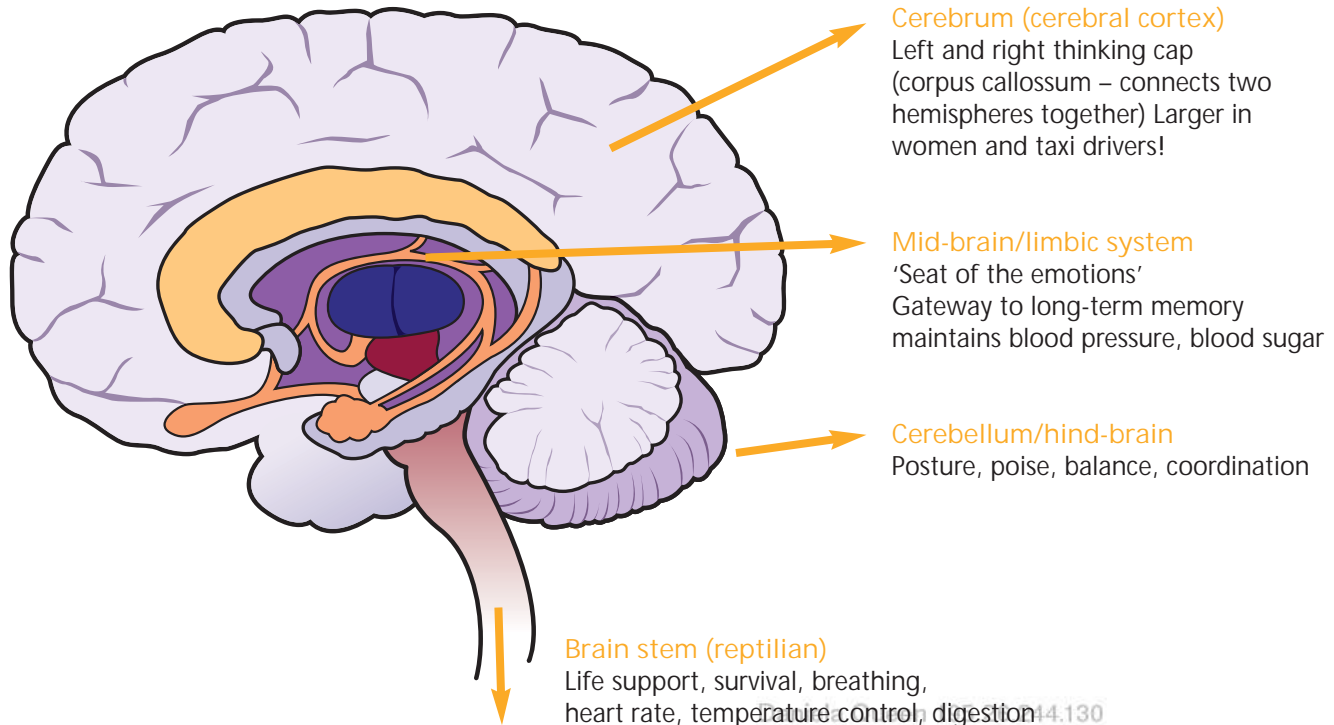
The 1990s were declared 'the decade of the brain'.



## Quick cranial facts

- The adult brain weighs about 1.35 kg (about 3lbs).
- The cerebellum is the largest part of the brain. This walnut-looking part is a folded structure in both hemispheres and is joined together by the corpus callosum.
- In a cross-section of the hemispheres, the centre portion is whiter (the white matter) because it contains myelin, which allows nerves to conduct signals quickly. A darker skin covers the whole of the white matter like a rind (the grey matter).
- Towards the back of the brain is the cerebellum which coordinates movements.
- The brain stem is like a stalk at the base of the brain which connects the limbs and internal organs via multiple nerve fibres.
- The brain has a trillion active cells, each with up to 20,000 connections. The messages are sent between neurons and dendrites. These neural pathways can be developed at any stage of your life to enhance memory, thinking and to manage the many changing situations that people face in a lifetime.

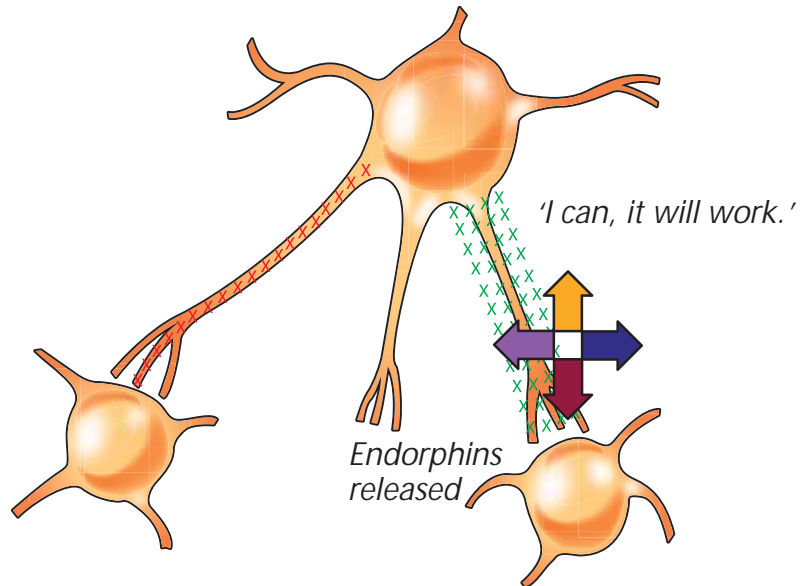
## Looking inside the brain



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## Sending messages

- The neurons and dendrites send messages and make new connections.
- It is possible to control your thoughts and therefore to control the messages that are sent.
- So it is important to make sure your thoughts support your goals.



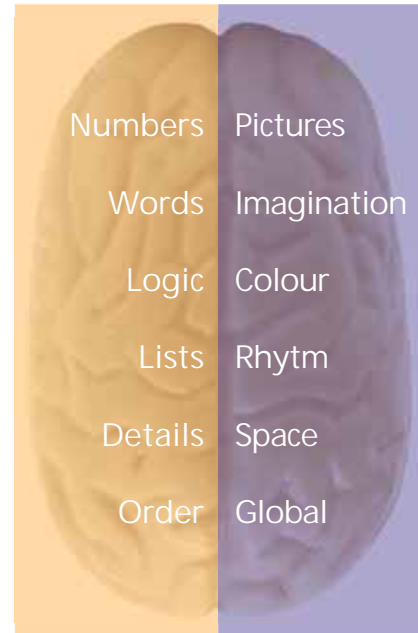
## Left and right brain thinking

In 1981 Professor Roger W Sperry performed an operation on a living person where he cut through the corpus callosum, which joins the left and the right-side of the brain together. He developed the theory of left and right brain thinking. Edward de Bono's lateral thinking (see the Information and links section on page 44) is seen as being right brain thinking.

Ned Herrmann worked with Sperry when he developed the HBDI Herrmann Thinking Preference model, which we have included in this programme.

Recent research by neuro-scientists shows this process is much more complicated, as most parts of the brain display left and right-brain thinking functions. However, it is still a useful shorthand to refer to left and right-brain thinking skills, as most people do have a preference for using one or the other.

You can find out more about the Herrmann Thinking Preference model in the Communicating and Influencing module.



## Healthy brain choices

Eating the right foods and drinking water can help our brains function better. Good brain foods include:

- omega 3 oils in fish, pumpkin seeds and nuts
- fruit
- vegetables
- oats and brown rice (which help the body produce serotonin, an important neuro-transmitter, which enhances memory and thinking skills).

Our physical condition also impacts on our thinking. If we are feeling physically weak or incapacitated, our brain function changes.

Dehydration often causes tiredness. For each 1% loss of water, the body loses 10% of muscular strength. For example, in a 60kg person, a deficiency of 1.2 litres of water in the body leads to a 20% reduction in muscular strength. Lack of water also causes an increase in uric acid – leading to kidney stones and dry skin – which also ages us more quickly, giving us more wrinkles!

When you exercise, your brain takes 25% of your energy reserves and requires oxygen and healthy blood supply to function efficiently. Taking a break every hour to stretch or walk, even just for five minutes, can help to refresh your thinking.

# Understanding how your brain works: exercises



## Exercise 1: habits

Experts now tell us that our brain is like other parts of our body – it develops habits and comfortable ways of working.

To experience what changing a habit actually feels like, try this exercise:

Cross your arms the usual way and notice which hand is uppermost now cross your arms the other way with your other hand on top.

For most people this feels uncomfortable and awkward. This is how our brain feels when we begin to think differently or adopt a new habit. For this reason, it is good to notice and enjoy a degree of discomfort - if you are too comfortable, you are not changing!

The good news is, if you practise any new brain technique, it can become comfortable and natural, just like when you practise something physically different.

## Exercise 1: feel the conflict

Look at the words below. Try to read them aloud saying the colour and not the word.

Green, Blue, Orange, Yellow, Black  
Yellow, Purple, Red, Pink, Blue  
Black, Green, Red, Blue, Yellow  
Green, Black, Blue, Pink, Red, Blue  
Green, Purple, Black, Yellow, Red

Most people experience a conflict in their brain. The left brain thinking tries to say the word and the right-brain thinking tries to say the colour.



## Reflection and actions



Use this page to record your observations.

Can you think of an occasion when you might not have been taking care of your brain?

What impact did this have on your performance?

What can you do to make sure you take care of your brain to achieve your goals?

## Tips for exercising your brain

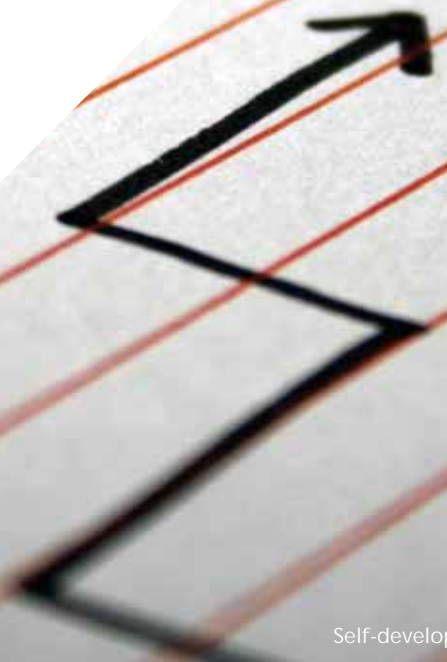
Notice your own thinking and behavioural habits.

Observe whether your thinking is influenced by your physical energy level.

Develop new neural pathways by doing sudoku, crossword puzzles or brain benders.

Physically challenge yourself to do things differently to break routines, for example, try brushing your teeth with the wrong hand.

Take care of your brain. Take breaks when you are working, drink enough water and include brain-enhancing food regularly in your diet.



# Direct your thinking

- Neuro-linguistic programming
- How our thoughts affect our emotions and behaviour



## Directing your thinking to achieve success

How you think directly impacts on what you achieve. There are many benefits associated with directing your thinking in a positive way. When you believe you can do something, you are more likely to achieve positive results.

*'If you think you can or if you think you can't, you're probably right!'*

Henry Ford

Direct thinking towards a self-belief helps you achieve your goals. Timothy Gallwey in his books on the 'inner game', explains how achieving self-control and confidence on the sports field can be translated to many other situations in life.



*'As golfers undertake to play the 'inner game' consciously and to develop skills of relaxed concentration, significant breakthroughs follow. As a player learns to reduce the mental interference with his golf, he stands not only to reduce his golf handicap significantly, but also in the ways in which he handicaps himself in the performance of every activity in his life. As he gains a measure of self-control he wins a measure of freedom.'*

Timothy Gallwey, The Inner Game of Golf

## Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)

NLP is the study of human excellence. It shows how human beings understand their experiences, make sense of the world and how they interact with others. It is a technique that teaches people how to direct their thinking to manage emotions, understand communication and achieve what they want.

It was developed in the 1970s by a group of psychologists including Richard Bandler, John Grindler and Gregory Bateson. They wanted to analyse the behaviour of successful people, to understand what underpinned their success.

Neuro – relates to the brain

Linguistic – relates to language

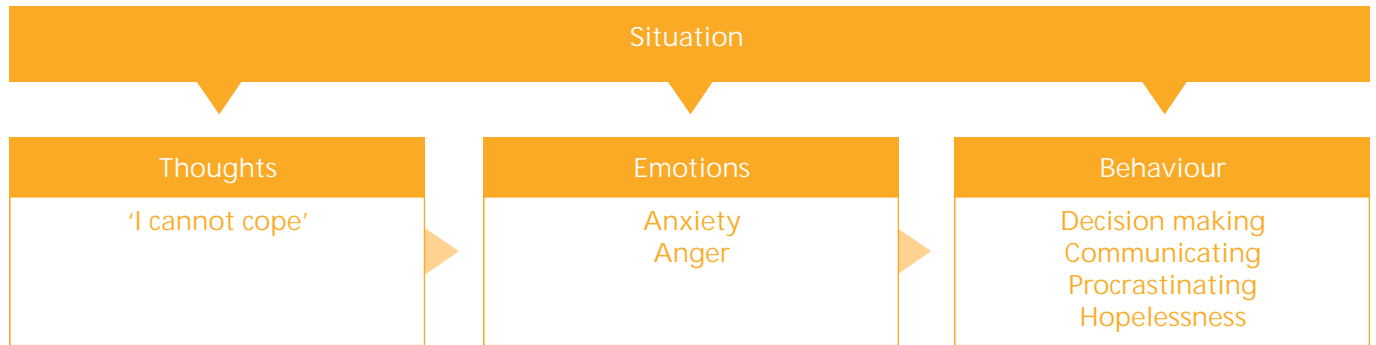
Programming – relates to patterns of behaviour, which can be learned

NLP consists of exercises and techniques that can be practised, enabling people to direct their thoughts and actions in a positive way. NLP users can learn to manage their own emotions and understand those of others. For example, if you are learning to remember a system for 'names and faces' you must:

- direct your thinking to be positive
- speak the language of success – *'I am learning to remember names'*
- adopt new systems and techniques to build successful patterns of behaviour.

You can read more about NLP in the Communicating and Influencing module.

## Our thoughts affect our emotions and behaviour



If our thoughts are not controlled, our behaviour can be both unproductive and demoralising for the people around us. This can be apparent in communication, such as in emails and in meetings.

# Direct your thinking: exercises





## Exercise 1: leading others

NLP explains how people see things and experience things differently. To direct our thoughts in a supportive way, we must recognise that 'our map is not the territory', eg how other people see the world may be different to us.

Often, fixed expectations can be the problem. It is very easy to think that:

*'I think this is the right way to do it so they should do it this way too.'*

It is helpful to direct your thoughts away from this one-sided way of thinking, as it often leads to disappointment and a sense of failure when people do things differently.

It is much better to tell yourself that:

*'I would prefer it if they behaved this way. But I can manage it if they do not.'*

Try this exercise

Think of a time when you were disappointed with the actions of others. Ask yourself the following questions.

- Did you have high expectations of them?
- Did you feel they 'should' or they 'ought' to do it your way?
- Did they achieve the task, even if it was not to your precise expectations?
- Were your thoughts helpful to you?
- Could you have applied the statement: 'I would prefer it if they behaved this way. But I can manage it if they do not,' in order not to have felt so let down?
- How would you have responded differently, had you changed your expectations?

## Exercise 2: direct your thinking for your ideal day at work

1. Everyone has good and bad days. Describe your ideal day at work.

What would you be doing?

How would the day be organised?

How would you feel?

How would you communicate with others?

What impression would other people have of you?

2. Now go through each of your answers and consider what you need to do to achieve this.

Do you need to

Plan more    Delegate    Work different hours    Say 'no' more often    Ask for help    Take better care of yourself

3. The actions you need to take to try to achieve this ideal work situation are:

## Exercise 3: direct your thinking for a productive meeting

Psychology tells us that all situations benefit from consciously directing our thinking. Being clear about what you hope to achieve from a situation helps you to obtain it.

What thoughts might help you achieve a productive meeting? Now go through your list and categorise each thought.

A. You always think or do this    S. You sometimes think or do this    N. You never think or do this

1.Thoughts BEFORE the meeting	A/S/N	2.Thoughts DURING the meeting	A/S/N	3.Thoughts AFTER the meeting	A/S/N

How can you incorporate some of these constructive ways of thinking into your everyday life?

## Reflection and actions



Use this page to record your observations.

How might directing your thinking help you to achieve your goals?

Grey rectangular area for recording observations.

Where might encouraging your team to direct their thinking in an organised way help to meet deadlines?

Grey rectangular area for recording observations.

How can you apply this information to enhance working performance and relationships in your own environment?

Grey rectangular area for recording observations.

## Tips for directing your thinking

Maintain control of your mind.

Remember, you have a choice about how you respond to a situation.

Direct your thoughts away from seeking perfection to seeing excellence, for example, *'I would rather x happened, but I can manage if it does not.'*

Be conscious of using words such as *'should'*, *'must'* and *'ought to'* as they can be judgmental and critical.

Recognise that you can direct your thoughts to a more constructive perspective to manage a situation.

Try to see things from the other person's perspective to understand both their and your own motives.

Keep connected to your sense of purpose about work so you do not get distracted by everyday challenges.

Focus on what gives you the greatest sense of satisfaction in your work role to inspire others.

Work with your team to identify the values and principles you would all like to follow. Help them see that it is a daily decision to stay aligned to those principles.

# Transforming negative to positive



## Transforming negative to positive



Research has shown it is important to adopt an optimistic approach to life. Positive thinkers enjoy better health and better work productivity. This section includes strategies to help you make the change and to help others to become more positive.

*'Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.'*

Abraham Lincoln

## Positive thinkers live longer

Scientists have proof of the power of positive thinking. They have found people who have a sunny, optimistic outlook live longer than those who constantly worry.

### Yale University researchers

The research suggests that people who feel bad about getting old accelerate the ageing process. In contrast, a positive attitude will add more years to your life than not smoking or taking regular exercise. A team of American psychologists found that people who were positive about ageing lived an average of 7.5 years longer than those who regretted the passing years. They believe that negative thoughts about the ageing process have a direct impact on the will to live.

### Better than low blood pressure

Researchers from Yale University, led by Dr Becca Levy said the effect of a positive attitude towards ageing was greater than physiological measures, such as low blood pressure and cholesterol, each of which is thought to add up to four years to your life. The effect was even more pronounced than factors such as keeping weight down, not smoking and taking exercise, each thought to add between one and three years to your life. The researchers studied information from 660 volunteers aged over 50.

Source: BBC website, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology



## Positive thinking is good for you

Royal Holloway College, University of London – What's New?  
News Release – 13 December, 2001

Positive thinking about future events correlates highly with measures of wellbeing. However, the ability to think positively is, in turn, closely associated with household income, how many friends you have and how effectively you plan to achieve your goals.

*'Our findings showed that the extent of a person's social networks, the effectiveness of their plans to reach their goals and their household income all make independent contributions to explaining the variations in their ability to think ahead to positive future experiences,'*

Dr Andrew MacLeod, department of psychology, Royal Holloway College.

# Transforming negative to positive: exercises



## Exercise 1: negative thought patterns

It is important to recognise negative thought patterns. Read the list below and see whether these types of comments are regularly used in your working environment:

- black and white – all or nothing thoughts, eg *'I am right, you are wrong'*
- generalisations – eg *'everything I do goes wrong!' or 'no one appreciates what I do'*
- suppositions about situations and others – eg *'I must have done something wrong'*
- perfectionism – eg *'I give up. I will never get it right'*
- pessimism and negative outlook – eg *'the NHS is just going from bad to worse'.*

What are the consequences of negative thinking patterns?

Can you identify pessimistic thinking at team meetings?

Would you consider yourself an optimist or a pessimist?

What might be a negative impact of perfectionism?

## Exercise 2: developing rational thinking habits

Many logical and rational people use words like *'everyone'*, *'nothing'* and *'always'*, without realising that it is not always rational to do so. It is not rational to be over-optimistic, but there is a large amount of evidence to show that constructive thinking, which supports your goals, can lead you to success.

Equally, it is not rational to be over-pessimistic. It is rational to be critical and analytical about a situation, but not to generalise or over-dramatise. Likewise, adopting a perfectionist attitude can lead to time delays that impact the whole team.

Think of recent situations that have caused you difficulty.

List the negative thoughts (in sentences) that you were having at those times.

## Exercise 2: developing rational thinking habits

Now ask yourself about these situations in more detail.

Try to give as much information as possible about how you were feeling:

A. Situation	B. Expectation Thought or expectation?	C. Consequence Consequential emotion?	D. Dispute Is it rational? Is this helpful?	E. Exchange Thought: if not, how else might I think about this in the future that would be more helpful?

## Disputing negative thinking

If you have identified negative thinking, you can change it by asking the following questions.

Just because one person says an idea is stupid, is that idea definitely no good?

What is the worst that could happen?

Just because you '*failed*' this time, in what way does it make you a '*complete failure*'?

How important will this be in x months/years' time?

## Exercise 3: defining positive outcomes

To help people become more positive, it can help to consider a particular situation and task. Imagine a difficult situation in a meeting, or one brought about by the contents of an email. Answer the following questions:

What is it you really want?

Can you reach a win-win solution?

What will your positive outcome look like or feel like?

How will you know when you've got there?

What might your department be like if you thought more positively?

What action can you take to achieve this outcome?

## Exercise 4: helping others think positively

In situations where others are negative, asking the following questions can help to challenge their attitude and help them to identify a positive alternative.

What does work?

In what way is work life improving?

What specifically is going right?

Who does support you?

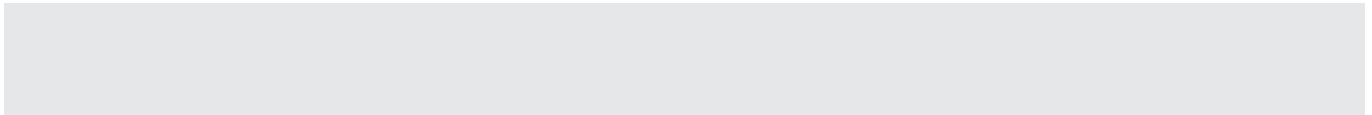
How can I/you manage this?



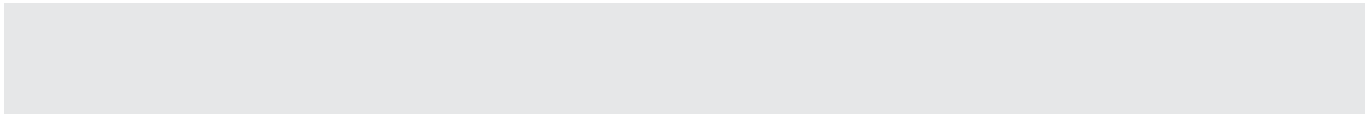
## Reflection and actions

Use this page to record your observations.

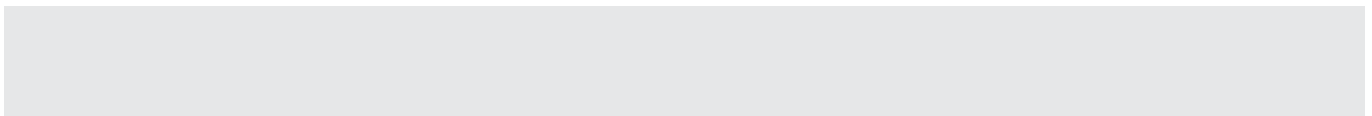
How could positive thinking help you achieve your goals?



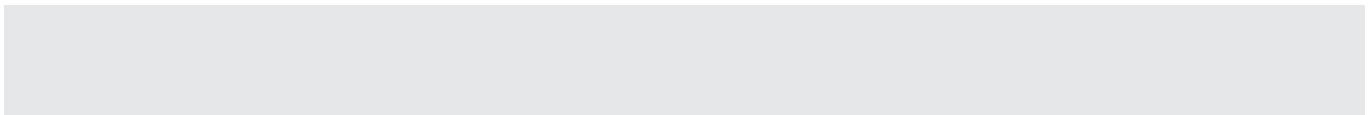
What impact does your attitude have on others?



What impact do other people's attitudes have on you?



What situations might you have handled differently, had you adopted a more positive approach at the outset?



## Tips to transform negative to positive

Become aware of your own negative thinking habits.

Choose to adopt a more positive attitude.

Become a positive role model.

Adopt positive body language and energy.

Decide to make the day a positive experience.

Create a journal of positive experiences.

Visualise reaching your goals and imagine success.

Observe and manage emotions.

Switch from using words such as 'everything, no-one, always and never' to specific situations to get your thinking in greater perspective.

## Decision time: make three decisions now

Decide three changes to help you think more effectively. Commit to doing these three things next week, and begin achieving your goals.

My decisions are:

1

2

3

## More information on thinking strategies



The NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement has developed a very comprehensive guide, Thinking Differently. For further information please visit [www.institute.nhs.uk/thinkingdifferently](http://www.institute.nhs.uk/thinkingdifferently)

*'We need to have imagination and courage in order to seize the opportunities there are to transform the provision of care in the NHS.'*

David Nicholson, chief executive of the NHS

*'Thinking Differently has contributed enormously to the success of our trust over the last few years. The techniques have helped unblock barriers and, as importantly, the approach has supported our culture of continuous improvement. It has also been hugely rewarding for staff as well as patients.'*

Stephen Ramsden, chief executive, Luton and Dunstable NHS Foundation Trust

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## See your success

Visualisation has been proven to support the successful achievement of goals. It is a technique used by many athletes, actors and professionals.

Close your eyes for a moment and visualise your success; see yourself achieving your goals, step-by-step:

- what barriers will you manage to get past?
- what will you be doing?
- what will you look like?
- how will you feel?
- how will other people know?

Make the images clear, positive and colourful. Imagine yourself in the picture and notice what it feels like to achieve your goals.



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