

Ten of the best (and ten of the worst)

We asked more than a thousand people to identify the most effective strategies for coping with suspicious thoughts. Here's the top ten:

1. Don't see the problem or situation as a threat.
2. See the situation for what it is and nothing more.
3. Try to find the positive side to the situation.
4. Have presence of mind when dealing with the problem or situation.
5. Feel completely clear-headed about the whole thing.
6. Be realistic in your approach to the situation.
7. See the problem as something separate from yourself so you can deal with it.
8. Keep reminding yourself of the good things about yourself.
9. Get things into proportion — nothing is really that important.
10. Just don't take things personally.

Several of these responses emphasise the importance of not exaggerating the threat in any situation. Don't give your suspicious thoughts more attention than they deserve. Instead, try to assess them calmly and realistically. If we think back for a second to the common reactions we discussed in the first part of this chapter, we can see that the top ten are generally examples of either

- a) Ignoring suspicious thoughts, or
- b) Taking a problem-solving approach.

What also emerges is the benefit we can gain from staying positive about ourselves. Don't let suspicious thoughts knock your self-confidence. **Don't allow them to stop you doing the things you like to do.** Remember that there are people who like and respect you.

Although it doesn't get a mention in the top ten, one other coping strategy stood out from the results of our survey. The people who were most willing to talk about their feelings were also the people least likely to be troubled by suspicious thoughts. It's another reminder of the benefits of sharing our worries with other people.

Of course the kinds of strategies we've talked about here aren't always easy to put into practice. But they can be learned.

You may be wondering which reactions to suspicious thoughts were rated the least helpful in our survey. Here's the list:

1. Becoming lonely or isolated.
2. Feeling that no one understands.
3. Feeling worthless and unimportant.
4. Becoming miserable or depressed.
5. Feeling helpless — as if there's nothing you can do about the situation.
6. Criticising or blaming yourself.
7. Avoiding family or friends.
8. Feeling overpowered and at the mercy of the situation.
9. Stopping doing hobbies or following interests.
10. Daydreaming about times in the past when things were better.

What stands out very clearly in these reactions is how emotional they are. Instead of ignoring our suspicious thoughts or seeing them as a problem to be solved, we feel miserable, worthless, overwhelmed. And when we feel like this, we inevitably cut ourselves off from our family and friends, perhaps in a bid to avoid the situations that seem to spark our anxieties. Hobbies no longer interest us. Our world shrinks until it seems that there's only room for our fears.

When we react like this we may wonder whether our suspicious thoughts are actually a sign that we're losing the plot — it can seem as if we're going mad. But, as we've mentioned earlier, nearly everyone has suspicious thoughts. If having these feelings is a sign of madness then pretty much all of us are in the same boat! So, having suspicious thoughts doesn't mean we're going mad. Far from being an indication of madness, our suspicious thoughts are the understandable products of the lives we lead and the experiences we've had.

Of course, though suspicious thoughts aren't a sign of madness, they can certainly cause considerable distress. For a minority of people, these experiences can make them clinically depressed and anxious.