



# Confront Your Negativity

When a negative thought creeps in, try acknowledging it as just that — a thought, not a fact.



▲ John D. Shima

In her bestselling book *The Power of Vulnerability*, Brené Brown noted that humans cannot put negative emotions, like fear, doubt, shame and disappointment, in a virtual box and throw them away. Abraham Maslow didn't like how psychologists labeled negative thoughts as a disorder or a dysfunction, so he introduced the concept of "positive psychology" in his book *Motivation and Personality*.

Since the publication of the United States Declaration of Independence, most Americans live with the misguided belief that they have the right to be happy. In fact, we only have the right to pursue happiness. Too often, happiness is tied to a specific outcome. If the goal attached to happiness is irrational, the repeated failure to reach the desired outcome inevitably leads to disappointment. Conversely, the more a person attempts to avoid suffering a negative outcome, the more the "happiness goal" is abandoned, and the outcomes will be perceived as less than satisfactory.

## STRAIN OF UNCERTAINTY

Since life is inherently uncertain, it is natural for the human mind to worry about negative things happening. Moreover, people tend to analyze their negative experiences in the hope that they can avoid making the same "mistake" in the future. Whenever we feel the strain of uncertainty, our limbic system activates our survival instinct, which tends to inhibit rational thinking.

Elite clay target shooters are obviously better at managing the strain of uncertainty than average competitors. Elite shooters label irrational thoughts that arise in response to the strain of uncertainty as absurd, or they quiet their limbic system by staying in the present and completely avoiding thoughts related to negative outcomes. However, I understand that avoiding thoughts about negative outcomes is easier said than done for most shooters.

## NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

In his book *The Antidote*, Oliver Burkeman said, "Positive thinking will not lead you to happiness, and it can in fact make you unhappier." He further stated that individuals should develop a negative capability to effectively remain emotionally detached from their negative thoughts. I call this



▲ What's the worst-case scenario for your round of skeet? Now realize how silly it sounds and dismiss the negative thoughts.

emotional freedom.

Burkeman described negative capability as a willingness to take a step back when the strain of uncertainty arises and adopt an accepting stance toward the negative thoughts rather than attempt to mask them with positive mantras. Accepting the thought as just a thought rather than a fact allows a dose of reality to creep into the situation. Stoicism and Buddhism are established philosophical approaches that support the concept of negative capability to promote happiness.

## NEGATIVE VISUALIZATION

A central tenant of Stoicism involves a process of experiencing the unpleasant strain of uncertainty head-on by visualizing the potentially negative outcome. This process of negative visualization usually exposes the irrationality of the exaggerated fear. According to Daniel Kahne-

man, author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, this pause in the action allows the mind's slow, analytical and rational thinking to override its fast, impulsive and irrational thinking.

Whereas happiness achieved through positive thinking is often brief and fragile, negative visualization generates a more lasting and resilient state of contentment. Imagining worst-case scenarios and examining the potential consequences objectively tends to expose the folly of the original negative thought. This stoic approach will enable shooters to accept the strain of uncertainty with a calm indifference rather than a strong emotion. **CTN**

► John Shima is a five-time World Skeet Champion. To view previous articles or order John's books, go to [www.johnshima.com](http://www.johnshima.com).