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Essay on mindfulness during the academic job search

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Do you have a running voice in your head that sometimes sabotages your efforts with thoughts like these?

- “I’ll never find a job.”
- “I don’t know where to start.”
- “My adviser won’t give me a recommendation if I tell him I’m exploring careers outside of academia.”
- “Networking is so stressful -- I don’t know anyone and I don’t want to talk to strangers.”
- “I can’t find any jobs online that seem like something I can do or would want to do -- there’s nothing out there.”
- “Why didn’t I hear back from the company I interviewed with yesterday? Someone else must have gotten the job offer.”
- “Why did I say that in my interview -- that was so stupid. I completely ruined my chances.”

Does any of this sound vaguely familiar? Do you feel paralyzed, as if you can’t get started thinking about career options and the job search?

Let’s start with that little voice in your head. We all have one. Sometimes it can be very complimentary, but often it’s a nagging sense of negativity.

Self-talk is the conversation you have with yourself inside your head and can be negative or positive. Self-talk is something that everyone experiences, and it can be a healthy way to deal with situations -- when it is positive self-talk. We often are not aware of our inner thoughts because we are too busy with life activities, but self-talk is one way in which we interpret the world around us. When the stressors of graduate school, a postdoc, life in general and the unpredictability of a job search converge -- it can become self-defeating and quickly spiral downward into excessive negativity and “thought errors.”

It’s important to identify some of the types of thoughts that tend to sabotage one’s efforts. According to [John M. Grohol](#) [1] of PsychCentral, these thought errors, or “cognitive distortions, are simply ways that our mind convinces us of something that isn’t really true” and reinforce our negative thinking. Here are some common types of thought errors that you may experience during the job search process.

1. All-or-nothing thinking. With all-or-nothing thinking, you view everything in terms of being either good or bad with nothing in between.

For example: “I will never get a job because I’m not qualified,” or “*Everyone* else is getting job offers because they are smarter than I am.” Often one rejection leads you to believe that every application will be a rejection.

Instead: Turn the thought around by focusing on what you *did* accomplish: “Given how busy I was with dissertation writing and teaching today, I’m happy that I was able to work on my résumé for 20 minutes.”

2. Labeling. You identify your shortcomings with a label.

For example: Instead of saying, “I made a spelling error in my cover letter and didn’t realize it when I sent it,” you say, “I’m so stupid,” or “I’m such a fool.”

Instead: Combat this by reminding yourself that labels only make you feel bad about yourself. Think of a different way to describe what happened that doesn’t use a broad label. Instead of “I’m incompetent,” try “Job searching is hard work and sometimes tedious for everyone; I’ll ask someone else to proofread for me in the future.”

3. Discounting the positives. You are adamant that your positive qualities and characteristics don’t count.

For example: “I have a great work ethic and get along well with other people, but that’s not enough. I don’t have the experience that all my peers have. I shouldn’t apply for this job -- I’ll never get it.”

Instead: Reflect on the positive by writing down your positive qualities and things you have accomplished. In the words of Eleanor Roosevelt: “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

4. Fortune telling. You randomly predict that things are going to turn out badly. But even if we would like to, we cannot predict the future.

For example: “I’ll never get a job” or “I know my interview will be terrible.” Believing these thoughts can sometimes cause you to act in a way that may make the prediction come true. If you go to a job interview thinking and believing that you will not get the job, you are likely to come across as unmotivated or unenthusiastic to the employer.

Instead: Put these fortune-telling thoughts to the test by intentionally reflecting on situations. It’s easy to want to put the experience of a bad interview behind you, but realizing you were off target with your negative thoughts will help you challenge them in the future and be a better job candidate.

5. Using should statements. You create very strict rules and unrealistic expectations by using “should, shouldn’t and must” statements such as “I should work on job search activities 20 hours a week,” or “I must get this application done today or I won’t be considered for the fellowship.” This sets you up for self-blame and loathing -- and can then negatively sabotage your job search.

Instead: Think about what works best for you and then come up with a plan to use that approach. For example, maybe you do your best work in short amounts of time with breaks in between. Set a schedule to work for 30 minutes every other day on career and job search activities. You will feel better and be more productive than if you put in hours at a time.

Mindfulness as part of your job search toolbox

Thought errors can literally cause physical fear responses in the brain (fight or flight), thus sabotaging your efforts. Often the stress of a job search causes us to procrastinate or dwell on the negative. A job search is not a predictable process, and while there are some things within our control, there are many factors that are outside of our control. Often people have trouble initiating tasks and following through on them when they are anxious. You can be so overwhelmed with the process that you just put it off until “the dissertation is written,” “I’m done with my research,” “at the end of the summer.”

Practicing mindfulness as part of your job search can help lessen the anxiety.

At this point you may be thinking that mindfulness is just some thing that only touchy-feely people do. You might imagine a yogi meditating outside in a field of flowers. You may feel that you don't have time to practice mindfulness. However, it is easy to learn and doesn't take a lot of time.

Caroline Contillo, columnist at Idealist Careers, writes, "Mindfulness is the quality of being able to stay with the present moment on purpose and without judgment." You are working to train your mind to notice stressful thoughts, but to minimize the response to them.

1. Be intentional. Practice mindfulness while conducting job search activities. Instead of just clicking "apply" and submitting résumé after résumé, develop a plan and be intentional about the applications you submit. The blanket approach is usually not very successful, and search committees or hiring managers can tell when someone has applied to a job without really thinking about it.

2. Practice breathing meditation. Set a timer for a certain amount of time, such as five minutes. Close your eyes, take deep breaths and count your breaths from one to 10, and then backward from 10 to one. If you find your mind wandering, just slowly bring your attention back to the present.

3. Be in the moment. Don't focus on the past and don't relive past job search blunders. Focus on the job search task at hand and you will be better positioned to combat negative thinking.

Remember, job searching can be tiring, frustrating and unpredictable with many factors at play. Do your best to stack the deck in your favor, have a support system, but don't beat yourself up when things don't go as planned. It's not a matter of *if* you'll find a job, but *when*. Good luck in your pursuit.

In the words of Confucius, "The more man meditates upon good thoughts, the better will be his world and the world at large."

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[1] <http://psychcentral.com/lib/author/grohol/>

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