

## Catch those 'It's About ME' ANTs

Have you had any of these experiences?

- A) The phone operator whom you have not met spoke in a tone you did not like. You were offended.
- B) The perfume promoter at the shopping centre by-passed you and attended to the more sophisticatedly dressed lady two steps behind you. You were annoyed.
- C) You were about to use the public toilet. The toilet cleaner stopped you and told you to go to the one downstairs. She is going to close the toilet for cleaning. You frowned.

If you had, chances are, you have been triggered by 'It's about *me*' ANTs.

ANTs (Automatic Negative Thoughts) are thoughts that are not created from our conscious minds. They are automatically churned out from our thinking habits. They often creep in, unnoticed, even when we are not thinking. At other times, they are triggered by situations we get into, just as the ones above.

'It's about *me*' ANTs are a result of the thinking pattern of 'Personalisation'. This thinking pattern is a by-product of our ego-centric, self-centred nature. As children we were naturally self-centred. We viewed the world as revolving around us. When we



tried to make sense of things, which we are still constantly doing, we placed ourselves as the centre point of reference. Everything is understood in relation to 'me'. This thinking pattern becomes unhelpful as we grow older. It distorts the way we understand and view things. It stumbles us because in reality, not everything is about us.

The three examples described above involve people we do not know. The phone operator, the sales-promoter and the toilet-cleaner are strangers to us. Yet we irrationally take what they do or say to us personally. "But they are rude," you may say. "Isn't it normal to react to someone who is

rude to you?"

The reaction is the difference. The difference is in the triggered emotions of feeling offended. A person without 'It's about me' ANTs would have objectively observed that the person's tone in situation A is 'unacceptable' but will not be emotionally triggered. He or she may then choose to point it out to the operator calmly and gently or let it roll off her back and walk away as in the case of situations B and C.

In situation B, the former is triggered by her ANT 'She is bypassing *me* because she thinks that *I* cannot afford it.' The latter simply notes, 'She is going for the person behind me.' In situation C, the ANT triggered is 'She is inconveniencing *me*.' The latter thinks, 'This is inconvenient.'

'It's about me' ANTs are characterised by the presence of 'ME' or 'I'. Here are more examples: 'They are talking about ME', 'I must have upset her', 'They are not involving ME because I am not good enough' etc.

This unhelpful thinking pattern is so common that 'It's about me' ANTs sneak up on us more often than we realise. They distort our perceptions of ourselves, others and our world and affect our relationships.

## Connect-Point

*"I am not what happens to me. I choose who I become." ~Carl Jung*

The thinking pattern of 'Personalisation' comes with the following tendencies. Understanding these tendencies will help in our process of shifting from this thinking pattern.

1. We are prone to think that *everything* that others do or say has to do with us. For eg. when a colleague turns up for work one morning without greeting us, we quickly conclude that it has to do with us, that something we have said or done the day before may have upset her.

2. We interpret each experience, conversation, look that people give us as a clue to our self-worth or value. A smile, getting attention from others in a conversation, being given a chance to get involved makes us feel we are worthy. A frown, being given the cold shoulder, not being chosen to participate makes us dip in our sense of self. This happens for as long as we continue to derive our sense of self from something outside of us, whether it is approval of others or their assessment of us.



The strategy for breaking out of unhelpful thinking patterns is in adopting the 3 'C's approach- 'Catch, Check and Change' as mentioned in previous issues on ANTs. This strategy will work for 'It's about me' ANTs as well.

'Catching ANTs' is most critical in this strategy. If we don't catch them, we have nothing to check and change. The clue for when 'ANTs' have shown up is to look out for when we are negatively triggered. When negative emotions are triggered, do a playback. What thought/s which you were not conscious of, had triggered that?

Once an ANT is caught, subject it to close scrutiny. Check and see if it comes under any of the tendencies explained above. Did I think that it was about me? Did it have to do with how I think about myself or my self-worth? Did my feeling emotionally triggered come from feeling disapproved, poorly assessed or unfairly rated? If the answer is 'Yes', changing these thoughts to more helpful ones will be necessary.

Changing 'It's about me' ANTs requires a radical shift in our beliefs. The root of this type of ANTs lies in our inherent and incessant need to know who and what we are, our significance and our worth. In short, it started from our need for a sense of identity. We unknowingly look to others to determine our sense of identity when we were clueless children. This gets us into the habit of subconsciously checking others' assessment of and response to us for clues. We unconsciously note how they respond, what they say to us or how they look at us to determine our self-worth. Debunking the thinking pattern of Personalisation, hence reducing the trigger of 'It's about me' ANTs requires debunking the belief that our self-worth is determined by something outside of us. It demands a shift from this belief to a conviction that we are innately precious and unique. We are inherently worthy. This worth is not dependent on anything or anybody.

We may be able to catch 'It's about me' ANTs. We may even be able to check them but until and unless we have arrived at an answer to our incessant quest about our identity, our self-worth, we will continue to seek out things outside of ourselves, interpret each event, each experience, each response as clues to who we are. For as long as we do so, we will continue to rely on this thought pattern. No shift and renewing of mind will occur. We will remain 'imprisoned'.

Someone once rightly said, 'When I discover who I am, I'll be free.' Discovering who we are does not happen in one moment. The same goes for freeing oneself from ANTs, and more so from 'It's about me' ANTs. It is also a journey. It is a journey which is worth embarking on. Come on board, will you?

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