

## White Bears and ANTS

### White Bears

In 1987 Dr. Daniel Wegner, a Harvard psychologist published a paper, “The Paradoxical Effects of Thought Suppression.” The experiment is commonly referred to as “White Bears.” (I’ve talked about the experiment in this [Video](#).) Wegner divided volunteers into two groups. Both groups were instructed to document all their thoughts during a five-minute period. The term used to describe this exercise is “stream of consciousness.” The subjects practiced this several times. A research assistant then walked in and gave them specific instructions regarding thoughts of a white bear. Every time they had a “white bear thought,” they were told to ring a bell or to verbalize it.

Two groups were created:

- One group was first told to **not** think about white bears for five minutes and then spend the next five minutes trying to think about white bears while engaging in the stream of consciousness exercises
- The other group was instructed to initially think about white bears and then to **not** think about them during the second five minutes while also continuing the stream of consciousness exercises.

The results were as follows:

- In both groups, the participants could diminish the frequency of white bear thoughts when asked to suppress the thought. However, no one could completely get rid of these thoughts.
- In the “expression” part of the experiment, the number of white bear thoughts increased in both groups.
- In the group that was initially asked to suppress the white bear thoughts, there was a dramatic increase in these thoughts during the expression phase compared to the group that was first asked to think about white bears.
- The term “rebound effect” was used to describe this large increase. When asked not to think about something, “not thinking” becomes associated with many other cues.
  - The incidence of white bear thoughts actually increased over the five-minute span of expression.

Conclusion: trying not to think about something will markedly increase the chances of you thinking about it.

### The Terrifying Triad

I feel this experiment is key to the whole mental health aspect of chronic pain. There is a lot of anxiety and extreme frustration that accompanies the experience and also a lot of terrible indescribable thoughts. The thoughts are usually so disturbing that we feel we have to suppress them. Well guess what? You are not only fooling yourself, you are giving those negative thoughts a lot of power. Over time, it eventually takes a tremendous amount of emotional and intellectual energy to keep these thoughts suppressed. It is the energy you need to be creative to help you solve your problems.

(If you want more details about the White Bear’s experiment, check out Wegner’s [Original Paper](#).)

“ANTS”

David Burns, in his book “Feeling Good,” uses a term he calls ANTS, which stands for “automatic negative thoughts.” These ANTS are a universal part of the human experience. Since I picked up his book in 1990, I have always wondered why we don’t have “APTS” or “automatic positive thoughts.” **WE DON’T SUPPRESS POSITIVE THOUGHTS.**

### **Patients Won’t Write**

I often cannot persuade my patients to begin writing these thoughts down on paper. My patient’s first response is, “This is not who I am.” That is correct. These thoughts are not who you are. They are **JUST** neurological connections and actually the opposite of you who are. Otherwise you would not be suppressing them. Paradoxically though, you are only giving them life by blocking them. Dr. Wegner discusses the dangers of negative thought repression in [“The Seed of Our Undoing”](#).

It is the necessary first step of the reprogramming process, which is to create an awareness of these ANTS. The thoughts that come out are often unspeakable.

### **Letting Go**

In the reprogramming process you are no longer editing and fixing. You are connecting and letting go. You will regain all of the energy that was earlier used to suppress negative thinking. The resultant energy surge is remarkable.

- Suppressing negative thoughts only empowers them
- You are not your negative thoughts
- You cannot write to rid yourself of them – the circuits are permanent
- The writing separates you from these thoughts

These principles are **universal**. No human escapes these relentless circuits. Chronic pain greatly speeds up their progression.

—Dr. David Hanscom