

Are People Out to Get Me?

Objective

To identify ways to relate to people to decrease paranoia regarding their intent and increase positivity through the pronoia approach.

You Should Know

Some people feel that others are deliberating trying to influence or control their lives. In some cases, this might actually be true; in other cases, it might be exaggerated or even imagined in the person's mind. In understanding your own worries about other people being "out to get you," the most important first step is to notice what is happening and understand to what extent your symptoms are interfering with your life and your ability to function normally.

According to experts, there are a number of possible causes of these worrisome thoughts, some of which fall into a category called "paranoid thinking":

- genetic (family history)
- substance abuse or misuse (cocaine, marijuana, amphetamines, alcohol, hallucinogens)
- medication side effects
- underlying biochemical disorder of the brain
- trauma history such as war, physical or sexual abuse
- history of domestic violence/controlling-type relationship
- stress reaction to overwhelming physical or psychological events (disaster, accident, threats, losses)
- combination of the above factors

If you are so preoccupied with such thoughts that you are having difficulty functioning, or if you are hearing voices in your head that are telling you that people are out to get you, please seek help immediately from a mental health professional who can assess your symptoms and offer treatment, including possible helpful medications.

If, however, you are experiencing a more generalized sense that people do not understand you, are trying to manage or undermine your activities or goals, and you sense that you are somehow a "victim," but you are basically open to the idea that these are "just thoughts," then this worksheet is designed to help you develop some new strategies. You can assess more accurately what is happening and learn to let go of your fears and worries; you can also learn how to give people the "benefit of the doubt" before you judge their behavior as malicious.

What to Do

Below is a list of some attributes that can be present for people who believe that someone is "out to get them." These symptoms can range from mild to severe. Put a checkmark next to the items that you relate to. Then, next to each item you checked, rate the severity of those

symptoms according to the following scale: 0 = never, 3 = rarely, 5 = sometimes, 7 = often, 10 = always.

Symptom	Severity
• Offended easily	_____
• Difficulty trusting others	_____
• Not able to cope with any type of criticism	_____
• Assign harmful meanings to other people's remarks	_____
• Always on the defensive	_____
• Hostile, aggressive, argumentative	_____
• Unable to compromise	_____
• Difficult, if not impossible, to "forgive and forget"	_____
• Assume that people are talking ill of them behind their back	_____
• Overly suspicious; think that other people are lying or scheming to cheat them	_____
• Unable to confide in anyone	_____
• Find relationships difficult	_____
• Consider the world to be a place of constant threat	_____
• Feel persecuted by the world at large	_____
• Believe in unfounded "conspiracy theories"	_____
• Hearing persecutory voices	_____

Note: If your answers consistently fall into the 6-10 range, please seek medical or psychiatric attention to obtain a proper assessment, diagnosis, and treatment plan from a trained professional.

If your answers fall in the more mild-to-moderate range, please continue.

Now that you have identified some of the ways in which your worried thoughts are interfering with your life, on the lines below, write down several situations that you have encountered recently that have made you feel that people are out to get you, or have it in for you. Specify who the people involved are and what the situation is.

1.

2.

3.

Next, take each situation and reflect on your role in the interaction. Are you overly sensitive to that person in particular? Is it possible you are exaggerating their behavior because of your sensitivity versus assessing realistically what they're actually doing or saying? What would it be like to give that person the benefit of the doubt? What can you say out loud (or think inside yourself) to reassure yourself that a person might not have negative intentions? What could you say or ask that person to help you understand their intentions before you jump to any conclusions? Write your thoughts below for each situation.

1.

2.

3.

According to psychiatrist Samantha Boardman, MD, it is hard to get unstuck from the “me against the world” mindset. She recommends shifting the “paranoia” mindset to one she calls “pronoia”—the definitive belief that others are actually out to *help you*, and a belief in the goodness of the world and others in it. Many people, she suggests, are trained to be suspicious of strangers and of others’ intent, especially under stress. She cites studies that show that if one

assumes a positive intention on the part of another person, one has a much more pleasant, less hurtful experience.

So, give it a try and let go of the worry and see if your positive approach toward other people yields more positivity in your life.

Reflections on This Exercise

1. Name two people with whom you would like to experiment trying the “pronoia” approach to dealing with your worrisome thoughts.

2. Pick one situation you might be anticipating having with that person in the coming days and weeks and commit to experimenting with this new approach. Record your experience below.

3. Write down three reassuring things you can say to yourself anytime you notice you are having thoughts that people are out to get you.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
