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GUIDE BOOK: BREAKING NEGATIVE THOUGHT PATTERNS



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Breaking Negative Thought Patterns with Transformative Questions

“Asking the right questions takes as much skill as giving the right answers.”

— Robert Half

Introduction: The Skill Behind the Influence

Every high performer knows the value of asking the right question. But the *real magic* begins when we ask the kind of question that stops someone mid-thought, that pulls out a story, an insight, a truth they didn't even know they were holding. That's what open-ended questions do—they open doors.

Research supports this. According to a 2021 Harvard Business Review study, leaders who ask more open-ended, curiosity-driven questions are rated as more effective communicators and decision-makers. Neuroscience also tells us that open-ended questions activate the brain's default mode network—responsible for introspection, memory, and future planning—resulting in deeper, more self-aware responses.

In a coaching context, studies have shown that open-ended questioning increases coachee engagement by up to 38% and enhances the retention of insights. In leadership, McKinsey reports that companies with strong “curiosity cultures”—where open dialogue is prioritized—are 30% more likely to be top performers in innovation and employee satisfaction.

This guide isn't about the basics. You already know the difference between “yes/no” and deeper dialogue. This is about mastering the nuances, practicing deliberate curiosity, and applying these techniques to the moments that matter most—when you're coaching someone toward clarity, leading through change, or navigating high-stakes conversations.

Here's what you'll get:

- A fresh lens on powerful open-ended questions
- High-impact examples and refinements
- Practical exercises tailored for real influence
- Reflection tools to sharpen your edge over time

Let's dive in.

1. Rethinking the Open-Ended Question

You've heard it before: open-ended questions start with *what*, *how*, or *tell me about...* But this isn't just grammar—it's about *intention*.

Open-ended questions:

- Are invitations, not interrogations
- Encourage reflection instead of reaction
- Shift power to the responder—creating agency and ownership

Instead of asking:

✗ Did that meeting go well? **Ask:**

✓ What worked well in the meeting, and what felt off?

Why it matters: Closed questions are about efficiency. Open-ended questions are about transformation.

“He who asks a question remains a fool for five minutes. He who does not ask remains a fool forever.”

— Chinese Proverb

2. Apply It Across the Board

High performers ask better questions everywhere:

- **In coaching:** “What’s the pattern you’re seeing in your decision-making?”
- **In leadership:** “How can I support you to take ownership here?”
- **In feedback:** “What’s one thing you’d do differently next time?”
- **In innovation:** “What would this look like if we started from scratch?”

Don't save these questions for formal settings. Use them in hallway chats, 1:1s, even quick Slack exchanges. Great leaders are great conversationalists.

“You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions.”□

— Naguib Mahfouz

3. Refining Your Ear: Spot the Lazy Close

Closed questions sneak in when we're rushed or distracted. Train yourself to hear them, pause, and reframe.

Practice: Rewrite these on the fly.

- "Did you meet your goal?" → "What progress have you made toward your goal?"
- "Is your team ready?" → "What's your team doing to prepare?"
- "Have you made a decision yet?" → "What's influencing your decision right now?"

4. Ask with Purpose, Not Performance

You're not trying to sound smart. You're trying to unlock clarity.

Before you ask:

- Do I care about the answer?
- Is this question serving the person, or serving my ego?

Sharpen your intent.

✗ "Why haven't you done it yet?"

✓ "What's been getting in the way of progress?"

High performers don't just ask better—they ask with discipline.

5. Follow-Up: The Real Superpower

Your first question opens the door. Your second one leads them through it.

Masterful follow-ups include:

- "What else?"
- "Tell me more about that."
- "What's the part you're not saying yet?"

Scenario: Someone says, "I don't feel confident presenting." You respond: "What part of presenting makes you most uncomfortable?"

Follow-ups are where the work happens.

6. Listen Like a Sculptor

If your questions are the chisel, your listening is the hand guiding it.

How to listen with depth:

- Paraphrase often: “So you’re saying...”
- Pay attention to what’s *not* said
- Don’t interrupt. Don’t rescue. Let silence stretch.

Tip: In high-performance spaces, silence signals strength. Use it to hold space.

7. Do’s & Don’ts for Precision Dialogues

Do:	Don’t:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use calm, neutral phrasing• Stick to one clear question• Follow curiosity, not assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Layer multiple questions• Lead with your opinion• Jump to fix or solve

You’re not interrogating—you’re facilitating insight.

8. Question Bank for High-Impact Conversations

When exploring strategy:

- What’s the bigger picture here?
- What assumptions are we holding?

When coaching:

- What’s the real opportunity in front of you?
- What would bold action look like?

When addressing resistance:

- What’s holding us back?
- What’s the cost of not deciding?

When reflecting on outcomes:

- What did we learn that we didn’t expect?
- What would you carry forward next time?

“Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers.”□

— Voltaire

9. Reflection: Sharpen the Edge

High performers don't just execute. They refine.

Weekly reflection prompts:

- What's the best question I asked this week?
- When did I default to easy or closed questions?
- What response surprised me most?

Try this journaling prompt: “Describe a conversation where I missed the deeper question—and what I'll ask next time.”

10. Final Word: Curiosity Is Leadership

Asking powerful, open-ended questions is not just about gathering better answers—it's about modelling the mindset of curiosity, humility, and growth. Every question you ask shapes the culture around you.

Keep it simple. Keep it honest. Stay curious.

Remember:

- Ask fewer, bolder questions.
- Listen like it's your competitive advantage.
- Reflect deliberately. Lead intentionally.

The next time you sit across from someone and want to influence, connect, or elevate, start with one bold, open-ended question.

That's where the transformation begins.

“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existence.”

— Albert Einstein
