# The Pink Elephant

What would happen if I would ask you to NOT think about a pink elephant? Maybe you could try it! Try NOT to think about a pink elephant for 3 minutes and see what happens… Were you able to not think about it at all? Probably not. This shows that it is not possible to push away thoughts and feelings, because they tend to come back even more. A lot of research has been done regarding trying to push away thoughts and emotions. The results? If you would **deliberately** try to think about a pink elephant, it, remarkably, shows up in your thoughts less often than when you try to **not** think about it (Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987)..
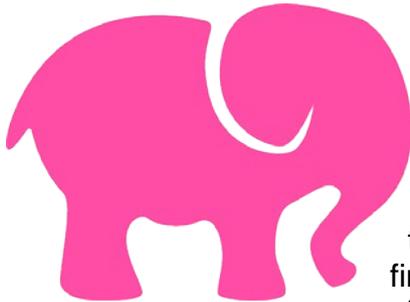
So what does this mean? If you suffer from negative thoughts or worries that you do not want to think about, it's not really possible to 'just not think about it'. So how do you get a more quiet, peaceful mind?

People tend to think about their own thoughts. If you try to suppress negative thoughts or worries, your brain will find a way to still think about them. It's better to try to not **avoid** these thoughts or worries, but to **approach** them in a different way. A characteristic of worrying is that it usually does not lead to finding a solution or solving the problem. That is why the thoughts keep coming back to you. A different approach, instead of worrying and trying to suppress this, is to structure them. In order to do this, ask yourself the next questions and write down the answers:

- What are the things that you worry about?
- What would you like to accomplish?
- What could you do about this?
- Is worrying something that helps me or not?

When you have answered these questions, move on to the next exercise.

Exercise: the 15-minutes of worrying

To teach yourself how to worry in a more constructive/helpful way, try to practice with scheduling your worrying-time. To do this, schedule 15 minutes during the day in which you are allowed to worry as much as you want to. It works best if you use a set time every day.
- It is important that you really do stop after 15 minutes. So use a timer on your phone and do something active after the 15 minutes, to distract yourself.
- When you notice that you have a negative thought or worry outside of these 15 minutes, notice it and write it down on a 'worry-list'.
- Only when your 15 minutes of worrying has arrived, you can think about all of the things you wrote down on that list.
- If it helps you, you can write down all your thoughts and worries during the 15-minutes of worrying as well. It might help you to structure your thoughts.

If you use this exercise daily, you will notice that thinking about your worries gives you a different feeling and you will notice that you will probably worry less, outside of your 15-minutes. If you use this, you do not suppress or avoid your worries and thoughts

anymore. You allow them to be there. That way, they won't bother you as much as before.