

THINKING TRAPS: UNHELPFUL THINKING STYLES



All-or-nothing thinking

Sometimes called 'black and white thinking', this kind of thinking operates in extremes and doesn't leave room from anything in the middle.

Example: I have to get all A's this semester; what's the point of trying out for the play — I'll never get the lead; either I do it right or not at all.



Jumping to Conclusions

Forming an opinion without enough evidence. Sometimes called "assuming the worst," there are two key types of jumping to conclusions:

- Mind reading (imagining we know what others are thinking)
- Fortune telling (predicting the future)

Example: I'm going to fail the test; No one wants to talk to me; I'm going to say something stupid; She didn't call because she doesn't even like me.



Emotional Reasoning

Assuming that because we feel a certain way what we think must be true.

Example: I feel embarrassed, so I must be an idiot; I feel awkward, so other people must think I'm awkward; I feel nervous, so that means something bad is going to happen; I feel lonely, that means I don't have any friends.



Over-generalizing

Seeing a pattern based upon a single event, or being overly broad in the conclusions we draw, often using words like "never," "always," "nobody," and "everybody."

Example: Nothing ever goes my way; I always mess things up; I can't do anything right.



Ignoring the good

Discounting or ignoring the good things that have happened or that you have done for some reason or another, thinking that good things "don't count." Paying attention to only certain types of evidence by noticing our failures but not our successes.

Example: It doesn't matter that they like me if the popular kids don't like me; I'm a terrible student (even though I have an A in one class); nothing went right today; I mess up everything.



Magnification (Catastrophizing)

Blowing things out of proportion (catastrophizing), sometimes called “making mountains out of mole hills”

Example: This is going to be a disaster; this is the worst day of my life; I’m never going to get over this.



Should statements

Focusing on the past, attempting to redo history with our thoughts, thinking that we could have known things we couldn't have known. Using critical words like ‘should’, ‘must’, or ‘ought’ can make us feel guilty, or like we have already failed. If we apply ‘shoulds’ to other people the result is often frustration.

Example: I should have studied more before that test; I shouldn't have said something so stupid; I should have worn a different outfit.



Judging yourself unfairly

These statements are harsh and critical. When we talk to ourselves this way, we are treating ourselves unkindly and without love and aren't recognizing that everyone makes mistakes and nobody is perfect!

Example: I'm such a loser — I can't do anything right; I'm so stupid; I'm the only one who can't do this; I'm ugly.



Accepting helplessness

Deciding there is nothing you can do when maybe we haven't tried everything, or deciding to give up instead of keep trying.

Example: It doesn't matter what I say, they won't believe me; I can't do anything about it; I'll never get better; my opinion doesn't matter; what's the point of even trying?



Perfectionism

Perfectionism is holding yourself to an unreasonable standard and being unable to tolerate mistakes. It often leads to beating yourself up over even small errors, and can lead to other thinking traps like “should” statements and judging yourself unfairly.

Example: I need to re-do the whole thing; I can't believe I made that mistake.

What are your common thinking traps?