

Learning about thinking (2022)

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Self – talk (automatic thoughts):

- what we say to ourselves about ourselves, others or the world
- our inner dialogue
- what we are saying out loud about ourselves, others and the world

Ask: *What am I thinking? What am I telling myself about this situation?*

Thinking errors are:

- patterns of unhelpful thinking
- inaccurate interpretation of self, others or the world
- thoughts that are not based on fact
- thoughts that help us minimize, justify, or make excuses for inappropriate behaviour

Thinking errors happen when:

- what is happening doesn't match what you expect or predict
- a stressful life event or change happens
- you feel a very strong emotion
- you have a habit of seeing things from a negative viewpoint or from a negative core belief about yourself, about others or about the world

Types of thinking errors:

“All or Nothing” thinking (everything is black and white)

You tend to think of things in extremes, either you are perfect or you’re a total failure, right or wrong, win or lose.

Example: A person on a diet eats a spoonful of ice cream and says “I’ve blown my diet completely so I might as well eat the whole tub.”

This causes problems because:

- you don’t realize there is more than one way to do, think, or feel about something
- you don’t respect others views and can’t negotiate conflict
- you struggle with perfectionism and wanting to make everything right
- you think that you are inadequate and can’t ever succeed

Mental Filters

POSITIVE FILTER: *Thinking things are the way you want them to be instead of how they really are.*

Example: Being given both a compliment and criticism; you would ignore the criticism, “I am ok, nothing is wrong”, “Everything is perfect”

NEGATIVE FILTER: *You ignore the positives and only focus on the negatives about yourself, others or situations.*

Example: “Life is unfair” or “I’m so hard done by” “I sucked and they told me so”.

This causes problems because:

- Promotes unrealistic thinking
- Don’t try to change
- You misperceive what is actually happening in your life and your interactions

Mind Reading

You act as if you are able to tell what other people are thinking, feeling or doing or going to do without checking with them.

Example: A friend cancels plans you had with them, you think “This is her way of telling me she doesn’t like me anymore; she thinks I’m boring.”

This causes problems because:

- You go the way you want without awareness of others and without checking with them.
- You expect others to read your mind and act the way you want.
- You don’t get your needs met and/or have strong reactions when people don’t read your mind accurately.

Fortune Telling (telling the future)

NEGATIVE FORTUNE TELLING: *You act as if you can predict the future and know that something will turn out badly with no strong evidence.*

Example: A person sees an interesting job in the newspaper but doesn’t apply for the job because they think “I’ll never get the job. I’ll be so nervous in the interview that I’ll say something stupid”.

POSITIVE FORTUNE TELLING: You tell yourself everything will work out well, with no strong evidence.

Example: “I will stop drinking in time”, “I don’t have to do anything different today because everything will be better tomorrow”, “It will fix itself”.

This causes problems because:

- **Negative Fortune Telling:** You justify not taking risks (e.g. being honest, trying new things) often because you’re afraid.
- **Positive Fortune Telling:** Sets you up for a big crash, you don’t take care of yourself or others, you avoid obvious problems.

“Should” Statements

You try to motivate yourself by thinking “I should do this”, “I shouldn’t do that”, thinking with “must”, “ought”, “have to” (Using judgemental words for things that are based on choice.)

Example: After working hard all day on making a wooden cabinet, a man says to himself, “I should have gotten more done; I shouldn’t have made so many mistakes”

This causes problems because:

- You lose touch with what you like, want and desire.
- You lose sight of seeing things as being a choice.
- You often judge others.
- Set up a power struggle with yourself.

Labeling

You attach negative labels to yourself, others, and the world. You take one behaviour or situation and apply a label to describe a whole person. These can also be racist or sexist labels.

Example: Your doctor cancels an appointment and he is “an idiot and untrustworthy”

This causes problems because:

- Push people away, don’t get close to anyone
- You make assumptions about who people are without getting to know them

Power & Control

- *Focus on getting other people to think, feel, or do things differently (the way you prefer)*
- *Doing things to impact others, rather than expressing your own thoughts and feelings*
- *Can be forceful or “nice”, non-verbal cues can also be used this way*

Example: “I just have your best interests in mind” or you threaten someone or buy them something to get them to do what you want.

This causes problems because:

- Can feel good in short term, makes you feel powerful or important but leads others to rebel against you
- People avoid you because agreement is based on fear-not respect

Victim Stance

Often seeing yourself as a victim. You blame others for your problems

Example: “Just my luck”, “He made me angry”, “It always happens to me”

This causes problems because:

- You don't look for your own responsibility
- You tell people they “make” you feel or do things
- You often feel angry, bitter and resentful of people
- You feel justified to act out against others because you believe they have harmed you

Self-Focused

- *Can have an overly positive view of yourself*
- *You think you are better than others, rules don't apply to you*
- *You think bad things won't happen to you, even when they happen to others*

Example: “What about me?”, “The consequences don't apply to me, I am special”, “I deserve it”

This causes problems because:

- You tell yourself that you have all the answers and therefore you don't need to listen to what others are telling you.
- You get overly focused on your own thoughts, feelings, behaviours and don't pay attention to others around you.

What if thinking

- What if.... Something bad happens
- What if... I can't handle it
- What if...

Example: “What if Sam says something about my project tomorrow?”, “What if I can't handle it?”, “What if I lose this relationship?”

This causes problems because:

- You create strong feelings of anxiety for yourself
- You imagine the worst case scenarios without proof
- You are focused on things that you cannot control

Challenging your unhelpful thoughts

All is not lost! Once you can identify these unhelpful thoughts, the last step is to challenge them or change them with more helpful thoughts!

Practice creating alternative thoughts that are better for you and impact you more positively.

How could you see this situation differently? How could you see this situation from another point of view? If this situation was not happening to me, what would I tell a friend to do about it?

Make a list of the unhelpful thoughts you have each day. Challenge these unhelpful thoughts by finding a more helpful way of looking at the situation. Write these challenges or alternative thoughts down. Pick one that makes the most sense to you and try to see the situation from this alternative point of view.

Practice using more helpful thinking patterns more frequently. General thoughts such as: I can handle it. I am ok. It's going to be fine. I am safe are all great ways to challenge many different types of thinking errors.

Use statements that are positive (e.g. I am strong) rather than statements with negatives in them (e.g. I am not afraid).

Ask friends and family what they tell themselves to make unhelpful thoughts more useful to them. See if their suggestions might be useful to you too.