

CHECKLIST OF AUTOMATIC WAYS OF SEEING THINGS

All of us see the world in our own particular quirky way. We can't take in every infinitesimal piece of information that surrounds us and impinges on our senses. This would be an impossible task. In fact, we human beings were designed in such a clever way that we function very well because we do not attend to everything flooding in from our surroundings. We automatically and extremely quickly notice some things in our world and filter out others. We do this without being consciously aware of the processes taking place in our brain. As a result of this "smart chip" performance we accommodate appropriately to situations.

Just as this is a very adaptive procedure and works to our advantage. It can also work to our emotional disadvantage. The problem is as follows: We as fallible human beings, develop habitual ways of seeing things in certain circumstances that distort our experience and cause ourselves to feel distress and discomfort. We make automatic distortions and errors in logic. These have become overlearned habits that do not occur consciously, but occur out of awareness. Once established, we use these habits consistently and systematically. All human beings do this to some degree.

These are habits we have learned from birth and right through our adult life. If these customary ways of viewing things have been learned, they therefore can be unlearn. The good news is that although the new learning process will take lots of repetition and rehearsal, it is possible to change. It is possible to restore equilibrium and live more happily without having to undo your entire childhood and all your past experiences.

A description of the most common distortions now follows. Most people instantly recognise a number of these. Please keep an open mind about all of what I have said, as we all use some of these distortions some of the time, maybe even more often than we would like!

"WHO NEEDS EVIDENCE"? OR "EVIDENCE DOESN'T COUNT"

This involves drawing a conclusion about a situation or even without any real evidence to support it or, in the face of contradictory evidence.

You jump to conclusions and interpret things negatively when there is no firm objective evidence to support your conclusion.

This might involve:

Mind-reading: you assume that people are reacting negatively to you when there's no definite evidence for this. For example, a person you know is walking down the street on the opposite footpath; she does not return your friendly wave. You immediately assume that they have deliberately rejected you, and this must be due to some flaw in your character.

The crystal ball effect: you magically have the ability to predict the future. You know that life and future events will turn out badly.

Ask yourself, "What is the real world evidence to support my conclusions in this self-talk?"

MENTAL FILTER

This involves focusing on only one detail taken out of context and ignoring other more important features of the situation.

You focus on this one single fragment (your mistakes, your faults, your failures, and your problems) and blow them up out of all proportion whilst ignoring your achievements and successes. It is as if you wear a pair of specially designed contact lenses that control and filter the information you notice out there in the real world. By doing this your interpretation of the event or incident is totally out of proportion so that your view of reality is darkened and you make yourself miserable.

For example: You are at a party and many people tell you how nice you look, one person says something mildly critical and you obsess about this for days or weeks and make yourself thoroughly miserable.

Ask yourself, how else may this event be interpreted? What's another way of seeing things? Are there any other alternative explanations that could be made about this event?

OVER-GENERALISATION

This involves drawing a general conclusion on the basis of one incident.

You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. You are telling yourself that if something was true in one case, it will apply to any case that is remotely similar.

Example: You try to fix the toaster without success, so you send it to an electrician. You then dwell on this failing and see yourself totally as a useless, worthless person. You use such words as, "I will never be different, I will always fail at everything that I attempt and it will always be like this". In fact nothing is that simple. Again, ask yourself, "how else may I see this situation?"

MAGNIFICATION/MINIMISATION

You blow things way out of proportion or you shrink their importance inappropriately.

Example: small bad events get magnified and large good events get minimised.

IMAGINING THE WORST AND “WHAT IF IT SHOULD HAPPEN?”

You imagine the very worst possible outcome of any event, and then worry, “what if it should happen?” Not only do you worry about the outcome, but you begin to live the negative outcome before anything actually happens. This often accompanies the mental filter.

TAKING THINGS PERSONALLY

This means that you blame yourself for everything that goes wrong, or could go wrong, even when you may only be partly or not at all responsible.

This may occur in the following manner:

You take responsibility for bad events

You assume that everybody notices every mistake you make

You believe that you are the centre of everybody’s (disapproving) attention.

ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING

This means that you see only one extreme or the other.

Things are either all good or all bad, and nothing in between.

Example: A friendship must be very good or otherwise it is very bad. If you are on a reducing diet and you eat one tim tam chocolate biscuit, you tell yourself “that you have totally blown your diet” and you eat the whole packet.

“Should” statements accompany this style of reasoning. You believe that things should, must and have to be, the way you hoped or expected that they might be. You create strong absolute and inflexible rules by which you, and other people have to live their lives. You criticise yourself or other people with these “should” and “must” type words. You take it as an absolute known that your total happiness is dependent on your rules being carried out.

Example: You think that people should, must and have to, behave the way you expect them to in order for you to experience happiness, and if they don’t you are thoroughly miserable.”

In the real world there are many shades of grey. More about basic underlying assumptions about life on another handout.

DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVES

You insist that your accomplishments and achievements “don’t count”

Example: You might say that:

“Any idiot could do that”

“Oh, it’s only a Russian Wedding Cake, anyone can bake”

“I only stood in front of 4000 women to give my talk, they were only housewives!”

EMOTIONAL REASONING

This means that you reason from how you feel. You assume that your negative emotions reflect how things, the world, reality are really like.

Example: You might say that:

“Because I feel like an idiot, I really must be one”

“I don’t feel like doing this, so I’ll put it off”

“Because I feel guilty, I must be a rotten person”

“Because I feel full, I must be fat”

LABELLING

You identify with your shortcomings.

Instead of saying “I made a mistake” and separating that one aspect of your behaviour from your total being, you tell yourself that, “all of me is a loser and a fool because I made a mistake on one or more occasions.” In other words, you as a total human being is identified with one aspect of your behaviour. Instead of realising that you as a human being is made up of a huge mosaic of various behaviours and even when this one, or maybe more shortcomings, you are still worthwhile and adequately functioning.

BLAMING

You blame other people for the difficulties you are experiencing, and overlook the ways in which your own attitudes, beliefs and behaviours might contribute to the problem.