

COMMON THINKING MISTAKES

All of us see the world in our own particular quirky way. It is impossible for us to take in every single tiny piece of information that surrounds us and impinges on our senses. So we learn to take in some things and not others, and to make quick conclusions on the basis of limited amounts of information. We do this automatically and usually we are not aware of the way our brain selects and filters information. This is a very useful process as it stops us from being overwhelmed with irrelevant information.

However, this process of selecting information and making quick conclusions also means that we can make automatic distortions and errors in logic. We can develop habitual ways of thinking that are distorted and cause us to feel distress and discomfort. Over the course of our lives, these thinking “mistakes” can become so over learned that they occur without our awareness. All of us make “thinking mistakes” to some degree.

The good news is that if these distorted ways of viewing things have been learned, they can also be unlearned. The new learning process will take lots of repetition and rehearsal. It's almost like learning a new language. However, it is possible to change the way you think about things without undoing all of your childhood and past experiences.

Here are some of the most common thinking mistakes. You can put a tick besides the ones you often make. When you are experiencing a negative emotion that seems to be extreme, prolonged or inappropriate to the situation, it is likely that you are making some of these thinking mistakes. Remember, we all make some of these distortions some of the time, maybe even more often than we would like!.

OVERGENERALISING

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

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

For example, you try to fix the toaster without success. You then assume that you will always fail at everything you attempt, you will never be different, and you are a completely useless person. Ask yourself: what is the effect of thinking this way, and is there an alternative way of viewing this event.

WHO NEEDS EVIDENCE? OR EVIDENCE DOESN'T COUNT

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

This includes:

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

b) **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 observable evidence that my conclusions and assumptions are true?

BLACK AND WHITE THINKING

This means that you see only one extreme or the other. Things are either good or all bad. For example, a friendship must be all good or it is all bad.

“Should” statements accompany this style of reasoning. You believe that things should, must and have to be the way you hoped and expected that they would be. You have inflexible rules about the way you and others should behave and you are critical of anyone who does not abide by these rules and expectations.

For example, you think 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.

MENTAL FILTER

This means focussing only on what is wrong (your mistakes, faults, failures and problems) and ignoring any positive aspects of yourself, your behaviour or the situation. By doing this your interpretation of events 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.

NB: Seeing things through rose coloured glasses can also be misleading and self-defeating. For example, if you think everyone else's lives are perfect except yours. Try to have a more balanced and realistic view of yourself, others and situations.

CATASTROPHIC THINKING: IMAGINING THE WORST

You assume that the worst possible thing will happen and then worry about it. You can also begin to live as if this catastrophe is definite, even though there is little, if any, evidence that this catastrophe will occur. Ask yourself: am I blowing things out of proportion? How likely is it that this will occur?

For example, when two bills arrive at once, you assume that you will never be able to pay them off, you will get evicted from your house and you will spend the rest of your life in unbearable poverty.

TAKING THINGS PERSONALLY

This can mean that you blame yourself for everything that goes wrong, even when you may be partly or not at all responsible. It can also include assuming that everybody notices every mistake you make and believing that you are the centre of everybody else's disapproving attention.

EMOTIONAL REASONING

This means that you assume that your feelings can give you factual information. In summary you reason that, “if I feel like an idiot, I must be one”. Because I feel angry, I must have been treated unfairly. Because I feel guilty, I must be a rotten person.

BLAMING

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