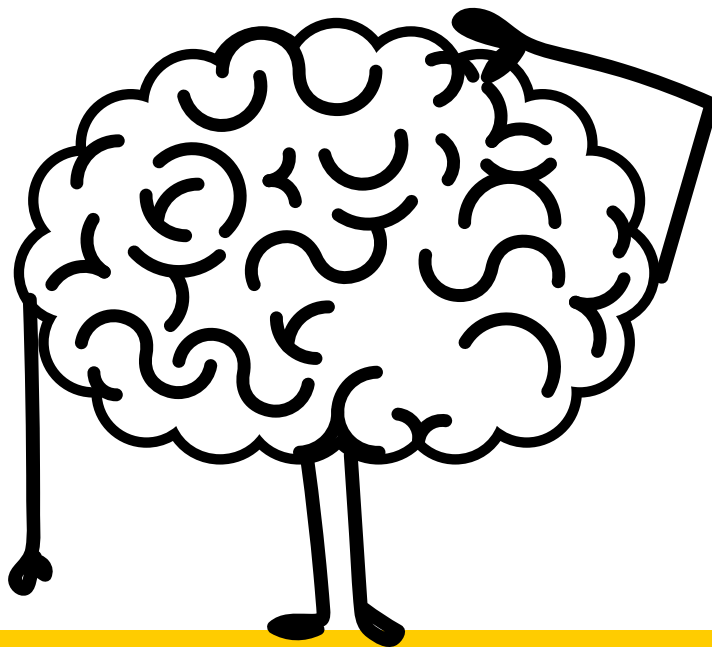


10 COMMON



THINKING TRAPS



Your brain is a terrible scientist.

Instead of analyzing all of the available evidence and making an informed decision about situations in your everyday life, often it instead makes instant gut reactions based on faulty logic. In the field of psychology, we call these cognitive distortions. I like to just think of them as common thinking traps.

These thinking traps definitely are common. We all fall into these traps sometimes. When you struggle with something like anxiety or depression, you probably tend to fall into these traps a lot. In this short e-book, I want to teach you about 10 of the most common thinking traps that I see in my personal and professional life and give you some ideas for fighting back.

Optimism is annoying. Realism > optimism, everyday. I want you to be a better scientist. The feelings that you have about a given situation are purely a prediction or a hypothesis. You need to gather more evidence and be realistic about things to determine whether your gut is giving you the right message. Any good scientist documents their findings, so please feel free to keep track of situations during your daily life that bring about these thinking patterns and then try your best to be realistic and work yourself out of these sticky thinking patterns.

MIND READING

TRAP:

This is the one where you assume that you understand the private thoughts and motives of other people. In reality, we can only make educated guesses about what someone else is thinking. That definitely doesn't stop us from jumping the gun and making assumptions about the thoughts in someone's head. At some level this skill can be helpful. Trying to understand what is going through someone's mind can help us to be empathetic. In fact, challenging yourself to take someone else's perspective can be very beneficial in many circumstances. However, we tend to over-interpret the behavior of others and our brains really like to have some sort of justification. Therefore, we find an easy answer to explain the person's behavior, which may or may not bear any true resemblance to their thoughts and intentions.

EXAMPLE:

You go into a coffee shop and see someone from work or class there and they seem to look straight at you, but do not bother to say "hi". In fact, they basically act like you are not there at all when you can be just about certain that they did see you. If you are engaging in mind reading, you might assume that you know the reason that they did not greet you. Obviously they avoided talking to you because they don't want to be seen talking to you. Or maybe it's because you are not a notable person and they simply can't be bothered to remember who you are. I'm sure you can see how engaging in this sort of mind reading would make you feel pretty terrible about yourself and the situation at hand.

MIND READING (CONT.)

SOLUTION:

The trick for this one is to catch yourself and acknowledge that, while your guesses may be true, they are just guesses. There are a bajillion other possibilities. It sometimes helps to look to yourself for counter examples as well. Could you ever see yourself acting the same way and ignoring someone that you know from school or class? What sort of circumstances would make you act that way? Perhaps the person is massively stressed and they are trying to envision some tricky part of a project that they are working on, which is causing them to blankly stare into space without noticing anyone around them. Maybe they are feeling upset about something and feel like talking to anybody they know might put them over the edge and make them become emotional in public, which they don't want to do. Or they may simply not have their contacts in and you look just as indistinct as all the other people around them due to poor eyesight. The point is... you don't actually know. These guesses are biased toward making you feel bad, when in reality there are many possibilities that would not be so negative.

PERSONALIZING

TRAP:

Personalizing is related to mind reading in that you are making assumptions about other people and situations without knowing all of the info. In particular, you make the assumption that you are the cause for a given situation or for someone else's behavior. This can lead to self-blame or being super hard on yourself, because it makes you feel responsible for what is going on around you.

EXAMPLE:

You come home and your partner, roommate, or family member is short with you and overall seems to be in a grumpy mood. Rather than absently wondering "What's their deal?" you instead think "Oh great. I must have done something wrong." You might assume that they are in a bad mood because of something you did or did not do recently. This can also take the form of feeling like you are solely responsible for other people's happiness. For instance, if you have a party or get-together, personalization may make you feel like you are to blame if someone seems to be bored or not enjoying themselves.

PERSONALIZING (CONT.)

SOLUTION:

While it is tempting to personalize situations, it can help to try to recognize what you do and do not have control over. I'm sure that other situations in your life cause you to feel like you have little to no control over what happens around you, right? That's one of the cornerstones of feeling helpless or hopeless - that there's nothing you can do to change things. Well if you have felt that way in the past (which is another faulty way of thinking) then you already proved to yourself that there's no reason to suspect that you have so much control over the way other people feel or act. In reality, there are many different factors that influence someone's feelings and behaviors. In the first scenario, maybe the person you live with simply had a really bad day, or they have a stomach ache, or they are stressed and irritated about something they saw in the news. Try writing down some alternative explanations and attempting an honest guess at how likely each of them are vs how likely it is that they are actually "your fault".

BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD

TRAP:

This is the belief that the things that happen to people in the world somehow reflect their moral character. That good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. We often think that someone “deserves” what happened to them. On the flip side, we also tend to think that when we have a string of misfortunes, we did something wrong to deserve what is happening to us. It can lead you to actually spend a great deal of mental power trying to figure out why you are being punished.

EXAMPLE:

This one comes up quite a bit, unfortunately, when people endure an assault or some sort of harassment. Belief in a just world would cause you to feel like there must have been something that you did to deserve the way that you were treated. It's really obvious to see how distorted this thinking is when you hear someone else doing it, but you might be surprised how often you actually apply this logic to yourself. Just like many of the other thinking traps, this can cause you to feel very guilty and contribute to a negative perception of yourself. You must be a bad person if you keep attracting such negative energy, right?

SOLUTION:

The Belief in a Just World trap can be pretty easily disproven. Nuns still get breast cancer. Boom. If you don't like nuns, substitute any other type of person that you respect and feel does not deserve any harm. They are just as vulnerable as anyone else to bad luck and sudden misfortune. The world is a shitty place sometimes. It's random and chaotic. Sure, if you tend to act in negative ways and surround yourself with unsavory people, you may be more likely encounter negative situations, but for the most part, we are all at the mercy of the randomness of the world.

EMOTIONAL REASONING

TRAP:

Emotional reasoning is one of the most common thinking traps that people fall into. Basically this is the mistake of thinking “I feel it, so it must be true”. Rather than looking to the facts of what is happening, we look to our gut feelings about a situation to guide our interpretations of it. This can be really tricky - basically it's flipping things upside down. In many cases, it serves us well first understand the facts of what is going on and allow that to inform how we feel about a situation. Instead, emotional reasoning takes your internal state and uses that as a filter. So if you are feeling bad, you are going to tend to interpret the situation as bad. This can obviously get you into a sticky spot when you have anxiety or depression, because you are often feeling less than awesome internally, regardless of the activity that you are engaging in. When you assume that the sense of apprehension inside you that is caused by anxiety is evidence that there is something wrong with the situation that you are in, it can lead to avoidance.

EXAMPLE:

One of the most classic examples of this comes up in romantic relationships. When one partner feels bad about themselves and feels like they may not be worthy of love, they may tend to interpret the behavior of their spouse as evidence that they are cheating, when in reality they have shown no signs of infidelity at any point in their relationship. So if the other partner doesn't answer their phone when they get off of work, the partner who is engaging in emotional reasoning will interpret that as a sign that they are avoiding them and getting into mischief when in reality, the other partner may have simply burned through their battery or their boss is talking their ear off and won't let them leave on time.

EMOTIONAL REASONING (CONT.)

SOLUTION:

Interestingly, in solving this one you definitely don't want to ignore the way that you feel. You should be honest with yourself about that. The trick comes in trying to separate the feeling from the circumstances and facts of the situation. Step one is to search yourself and determine what exactly it is that you are feeling emotionally. In the case of the example above, the person would say to themselves "Okay. I have been feeling like crap about myself lately. I don't think that I'm taking care of myself as well as I should and that bugs me." Once you actually identify the feelings that you have, try to recognize the way that they are painting your perception about the situation at hand. The person in this scenario might then say to themselves "I'm assuming that they feel the same way about me as I do right now." Then you can work to find some counter examples or other explanations to explain the other person's behavior.

SHOULD AND MUSTS

TRAP:

Some of the most common phrases that I hear from clients of mine are “I know I shouldn’t think this but…” or “I should be better about…” Albert Ellis, one of the fathers of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy calls this “musterbation” we endlessly apply shoulds, musts, needs, and have tos to ourselves. The result is that we give ourselves an unreasonable standard to live up to. It also creates a situation where you are passing a judgment on yourself. When there is something that you think you “should” be doing, you tend to feel pretty bad when you fall short of it. A lot of these rules that we make up for ourselves are actually pretty arbitrary and all they do is serve as guilt-generators in our daily lives. We also tend to apply these rules to other people as well and become irritated or angry when we feel like they are not living up to them.

EXAMPLE:

A big example of “shoulding yourself to death” is the sentiment “I should be thankful for what I have”. I’m sure you can see how this statement would make you feel exceptionally guilty when you find yourself complaining and taking the good aspects of your life for granted.

SHOULD AND MUSTS

SOLUTION:

In my experience the best antidote to falling in the pit of shoulds and musts is to reframe them. Rather than saying that you should act a certain way, try telling yourself that you would like to act a certain way or have a goal of acting a certain way. This simple reframe really changes the vibe of the statement. When you make a should statement, you are basically setting yourself up for failure. It becomes a binary scenario where you either succeed or fail. If you are able to reframe it as a goal of yours, you have more wiggle room and its possible for you to recognize that you are making incremental progress toward your goal. You should pay your bills. That's a good situation where a should statement is totally appropriate. You MUST pay your bills otherwise your credit will get wrecked and you can get lose the services that you pay for. If you wanted to become more thankful for what you have, it would be more appropriate to say "I would like to notice how fortunate I am more often". When you frame it as a goal that you have, you can appreciate how you noticed the little things in your life that you are thankful for even though you bitched and moaned about a few things throughout the week as well. It's not a failure, it's all part of the journey of improving.

BLACK AND WHITE THINKING

TRAP:

You are probably already familiar with this one. It's the tendency to lump things into one of two categories. For example: successes and failures, good and bad people, friends and enemies, smart and dumb etc. You might also think of this as "all or nothing thinking". As humans, we engage in black and white thinking all the time. In reality, there are many shades of gray and rarely do things fit neatly into one category or the other.

EXAMPLE:

Let's say that you are trying to exercise at the gym more often with the intention of bettering your fitness and overall health. On a certain day, you might go to the gym for 35 minutes instead of the full hour that you intended. If you were engaging in black and white thinking you would probably put this gym excursion into the "fail" category because you failed to reach your goal of being at the gym for a whole hour. That's not really fair, though. The effort that you put in for those 35 minutes doesn't suddenly *poof* into thin air just because you didn't quite get all the way to 60 minutes. You still get the benefit of every minute that you spent there, despite it being less than intended. Engaging in black and white thinking can make you feel pretty discouraged and you might even quit going to the gym altogether because you feel like "What's the point?" if you can't make it a whole hour.

BLACK AND WHITE THINKING (CONT.)

SOLUTION:

The fix for this one is to really challenge yourself. Ask yourself whether you can be absolutely certain that there are only two categories in this situation. Is there any chance that there is some gray area in between? Write a simple two-column pros and cons list. In the example above, you would write at the top "Went to the gym for 35 minutes". Cons might include: I didn't make it to the full hour, I didn't get as much exercise as I would have, or I didn't reach my goal of 60 minutes. Pros might include: I got 30 minutes of cardio in, I learned how to use a new piece of equipment even though I didn't use anything else, or I was able to go to the gym AND still catch my favorite TV show. When you put it on paper, you can see how it doesn't really make sense to think in an all or nothing way about the situation.

OVERGENERALIZATION

TRAP:

This is when you take one piece of evidence or one example and apply it as a rule to everything. This is a normal part of the way that human beings learn and create memories. There is a classic experiment where “little Albert” was trained to be afraid of white laboratory rats by having him spend time with a rat and then startling him with scary noises. Eventually he developed a full on phobia of rats (shitty, I know). The interesting thing was that he overgeneralized that fear to other fluffy creatures. Without being specifically trained to be afraid of them, it turns out that he became fearful of bunnies, dogs, and even a fuzzy Santa Claus mask. The tendency to make rules and apply them broadly is actually something that can help us survive, but it also gets us into a lot of trouble when we unnecessarily generalize to situations in everyday life.

EXAMPLE:

Overgeneralization sometimes occurs with school. If a child has a bad teacher that is mean to them and makes them feel uncomfortable, they may overgeneralize that learned knowledge to apply to all teachers. As a result, they may start to dislike teachers and want to avoid school altogether. This can also happen in adults with doctors or people from a specific profession (lawyers, perhaps?).

OVERGENERALIZATION (CONT.)

SOLUTION:

Much like the solution to the Belief in a Just World trap, for overgeneralization, it can be really helpful to find counter-examples. Are there any instances that prove that your rule is not always true? For instance, you might have the overgeneralization that all lawyers are money hungry vampires. Sure, there may be some evidence in the media that supports this hypothesis of yours. However, you have probably also heard of lawyers that work for non-profit organizations or do extensive pro bono (free) work because they seem to honestly care about their fellow humans. Providing counter examples may not stop you from feeling like your rule applies in some situations, but it will encourage you to focus on the unique aspects of each situation rather than lumping them all together.

FILTERING

TRAP:

When I was a kid, I had a board game based on the movie Jumanji. It had cards that told you what your next move would be, but in order to understand what the jumbled text said, you had to put the cards underneath this red tinted plastic lens in the center of the board. That colored lens would filter out the red in the jumbled mess and reveal the words hidden underneath. Well when you engage in the filtering trap, you apply a filter to your experiences. In my books I refer to these as “shit colored glasses”. If you look at the world through shit colored glasses, then everything will tend to appear... a bit crappy. In everyday life we tend to filter out the good details and only see the negative aspects of a situation. This one hardly requires explanation. Your attention is biased toward things that support the way you already feel about yourself.

EXAMPLE:

Filtering often happens when you have interactions with other people. Maybe you see someone at a coffee shop that does acknowledge you. You ask how they are and you have a few minutes of small talk. Everything was fairly normal and friendly with no issues from an outside perspective. However, if you are engaging in filtering, all you can focus on is the fact that you forget the name of the street that your office is on or the fact that you had a stain on your shirt. You pay attention to all the negatives and ignore the elements of the interaction that were positive.

FILTERING (CONT.)

SOLUTION:

This is where you need to put on your scientist hat. Remember that your assumptions about a situation are only guesses or hypotheses. You need evidence to back those up. Examine the evidence about a situation. You don't need to discount or deny the aspects that are negative, but you need to be a better scientist and examine ALL of the evidence before coming to a conclusion. I find that a journal works really well here. If you have a tendency to filter out the positive aspects of your behavior, use your journal to notice 3 positive aspects every day. By consistently challenging yourself to see the stuff that you automatically filter out, you can train your attention to be less negatively biased. This will look a little different for everyone depending on what you typically filter out. For me, I challenge myself to identify 3 things that I am proud of myself for each day.

CATASTROPHIZING

TRAP:

Catastrophizing is when you make a huge deal about things that are not necessarily all that bad. This can also be called amplifying. Basically you take a situation that does definitely suck, but then you multiply it until it feels like the worst thing ever. Yes it's bad, but it's not THAT bad.

EXAMPLE:

You are a student and fail a midterm for one of your important classes. That definitely sucks and you may need to take a good look at your study behaviors to see where you went wrong. However, if you are catastrophizing, you may take that to mean that you need to switch majors because obviously you aren't suited for this type of work or maybe you even feel like you should drop out of school altogether because there is no point if you are just going to flunk out anyway. You take that nugget of truth that you were bad at this particular test and blow it way out of proportion.

SOLUTION:

The arch nemesis of catastrophic thinking is specificity. Challenge yourself to be very specific about the circumstances when you find yourself going down this road. In what specific ways did you fall short of your goal? In what other ways are you still doing alright? Even neutral is better catastrophically bad. For instance, maybe you are getting a B or a C in the class overall now that you performed poorly on that midterm. Is that a great overall grade? Not really. But is it the type of grade that would cause someone to flunk out? Definitely not! By being specific about the particular areas that you may have messed up, you can prevent yourself from spiraling out of control and making a complete catastrophe over a mild shortcoming.

UNDERESTIMATING COPING ABILITY

TRAP:

For one reason or another, as humans, we tend to have very little confidence in our ability to “handle things”. Maybe it has to do with the pervasiveness of common sayings like “I just can’t even”, but we tend to give ourselves very little credit for our innate resilience and ability to rise to the occasion.

EXAMPLE:

Avoidance often comes along with issues like anxiety or depression. Say you have a wedding coming up for one of your close friends. You really want to go, but you are super afraid that the amount of people there might make you anxious or even give you a panic attack. You feel like you simply “can’t handle” the situation because it has been built up in your head as being an insurmountable task. The thought of all of the things that could possibly go wrong fills you with dread. The end result is that you pretend to be physically ill so that you have a good excuse for not attending.

UNDERESTIMATING COPING ABILITY (CONT.)

SOLUTION:

Remind yourself that you have survived literally everything that you have ever been through in your entire life. Unless you have literally died and been brought back to life, that is a point that you cannot disagree with me on. You have a 100% track record of getting through your life. Even if you have had a panic attack or have done things that you found embarrassing, those things didn't kill you. You are here breathing and reading this guide. Often there are also counterexamples to your fear. If you feel like it is 100% certain that you will make a fool of yourself at this wedding, maybe you can find an example of a similar situation that didn't work out so terribly for you. It may also help to adjust your definition of coping. Do you need to be absolutely carefree and "normal" to qualify for "coping" with a situation? Of course not (see Black and White Thinking). If you got to wedding, had a private freak out session in the bathroom, exhausted your body's panic reaction, and then went through the rest of the wedding as a happy, albeit slightly exhausted, attendee... that's still pretty good!

THINKING TRAPS WORKSHEET

WHAT HAPPENED?

WHAT WERE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS
ABOUT THE SITUATION?

HOW DID IT MAKE YOU FEEL?

WHAT THINKING TRAP WERE YOU
USING?

WHAT ARE SOME MORE HELPFUL
EXPLANATIONS?

OTHER THOUGHTS
