Unhelpful thinking styles

Common habits of mind that make things look worse than they are.

Everyone's mind takes shortcuts, especially under stress. These habits are normal. Once you can spot one, you can decide whether to go along with it.

All-or-nothing thinking

Seeing things as total success or total failure, with nothing in between. "I missed one session at the gym, so the whole week is ruined."

Catastrophising

Jumping to the worst possible outcome and treating it as likely. "This headache is probably something serious."

Mind reading

Assuming you know what others think, usually something bad about you. "They went quiet. They think I am boring."

Fortune telling

Predicting that things will go badly before they have happened. "There is no point applying. I will not get it."

Mental filter

Noticing the one thing that went wrong and filtering out everything that went well.

Discounting the positive

Explaining away good things. "They only said that to be nice."

Emotional reasoning

Taking a feeling as proof. "I feel like a fraud, so I must be one."

"Should" and "must"

Holding yourself or others to rigid rules. "I should be able to cope with this on my own."

Labelling

Summing up a whole person in one harsh word. "I am useless." "He is a waste of space."

Taking it personally

Blaming yourself for things that were not all down to you. "The meeting went flat. It was my fault."

Try this

Over the next week, see if you can catch one of these each day. You do not need to argue with it. Just name it: "That is mind reading again."

My notes and questions

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Spot the thinking style

Practise naming the habit before you try it on your own thoughts.

Name _____ Date _____

Read each thought. Which unhelpful thinking style is at work? There may be more than one. Then write a fairer way of putting it.

The thought	Thinking style	A fairer way of putting it
1. "I stumbled over one answer. The whole interview was a disaster."		
2. "He has not texted back. He has gone off me."		
3. "I feel so guilty, I must have done something wrong."		
4. "I should never need to ask for help."		
5. "They said the meal was lovely, but they were only being polite."		
6. "If I go to the party, nobody will talk to me."		
7. "I forgot her birthday. I am a terrible friend."		

Now my thoughts from this week

My thought	Thinking style	A fairer way of putting it

One way of reading them: 1 all-or-nothing thinking, 2 mind reading, 3 emotional reasoning, 4 "should" and "must", 5 discounting the positive, 6 fortune telling, 7 labelling. Several fit more than one.

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Thought, feeling or fact?

A sorting exercise: is each statement a fact, a thought or a feeling?

Name _____ Date _____

A **fact** is something a camera could record. A **thought** is what your mind says about it: an opinion, a guess or a prediction. A **feeling** is an emotion, usually one word: sad, scared, angry, ashamed.

Mark each statement with an X in the right column.

Statement	Fact	Thought	Feeling
I was ten minutes late for the meeting.			
Everyone thinks I am unreliable.			
Anxious.			
My manager did not say good morning.			
She is annoyed with me.			
I am going to lose my job.			
Ashamed.			
I have not been out with friends in three weeks.			
Nobody wants me around.			
Lonely.			

Notice

"I feel like a failure" is a thought, even though it starts with "I feel". If you can swap "I feel" for "I think", it is a thought.

A situation from my week

The facts	What I thought	What I felt
What a camera would have recorded	Opinions, guesses, predictions	One word for each feeling

What changes when I separate the three?

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Thought record (step by step)

Work through one upsetting thought from start to finish.

Name _____ Date _____

1. The situation. Where was I, what was happening?

2. Feelings

Name each one and rate it 0 to 10

3. The hot thought

The thought that carries the most feeling. How much do I believe it (0 to 100%)?

4. Evidence that supports the thought

Facts only, not feelings or guesses

5. Evidence that does not fit the thought

What would I tell a friend? What have I missed?

6. A more balanced way of seeing it. Take both columns into account.

7. How much do I believe the balanced view? (0 to 100%)

8. My feelings now (0 to 10)

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Questions to test a thought

Keep this beside you when you fill in a thought record.

Pick two or three questions that fit the thought in front of you. The aim is to see the situation accurately. It is not to talk yourself into feeling fine.

Check the evidence

- What are the facts here, and what am I adding?
- What is the evidence for this thought? What is the evidence against it?
- Has this worry come up before? What actually happened?

Look from another angle

- If my closest friend had this thought, what would I say to them?
- How might I see this in a week, a month, a year?
- Is there another explanation I have not considered?

Check the thinking style

- Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms?
- Am I predicting the future or reading minds?
- Am I holding myself to a standard I would never apply to anyone else?

Check the cost

- What does believing this thought do to me? How do I feel and act when I buy into it?
- Does thinking this way help me deal with the situation?

Move to action

- If the thought is partly true, what can I do about that part?
- What is the worst that could realistically happen? Could I cope? Who or what would help?
- What is one small step I can take now?

A last question

What would be a fairer way of putting this?

My notes and questions

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Putting a thought on trial

Weigh the evidence for and against one harsh thought, the way a court would.

Name _____ Date _____

The thought on trial (write it as one clear sentence)

How strongly do I believe it right now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

The case for

Solid evidence that the thought is true. Would it stand up in court?

The case against

Evidence that it is not true, or not the whole truth

Questions for the jury

- Am I confusing a feeling with a fact?
- What would someone who cares about me say about this evidence?
- Have there been times when this thought turned out not to be true?

The verdict. A fair summing up, based on all the evidence.

How strongly do I believe the original thought now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

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Worst case, best case, most likely

For a worry about the future: write out the worst case, the best case and the most likely one.

Name _____ Date _____

What am I worried about?

Worst case

What is the very worst that could happen?

Best case

What is the best that could happen?

Most likely

Realistically, what will probably happen?

How likely is the worst case, really?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Will not happen — Certain

If the worst did happen, how would I cope? Who and what would help me?

What can I do now to make a good outcome more likely?

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Behavioural experiment planner

Plan a real-life test of a prediction, and record what happened.

Name _____ Date _____

Before

The belief or prediction I am testing. What exactly do I think will happen?

How strongly do I believe it?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

The experiment. What will I do, where and when?

What might get in the way, and how will I handle it? (Include any safety behaviours I will drop.)

After

What actually happened? Stick to what I saw and heard.

How does that compare with my prediction?

What have I learned? What does this say about the original belief?

How strongly do I believe the original prediction now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

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