

Thought-Traps: Ten Common Mistakes of Thinking*

When people find themselves getting depressed, anxious, angry or otherwise “stuck”, the way they view the world can be part of the problem. Below is a list of 10 different mistakes that people commonly make as they think about what is happening in their lives. These mistakes distort the reality of situations, making them seem worse than they actually are. When people fall into the trap of believing that their mistaken ways of thinking are correct, they increase the likelihood that they will feel depressed, anxious etc.

If you feel you don't fall into any of these traps, you may find it helpful to think about other people you know, and consider whether or not they fall into them. Sometimes we don't notice that we are hearing people make these mistakes, and it can be easy to believe what they are saying. When that happens we can get worked up about other people's problems.

1. ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING:

You think in black-or-white categories. For example, you believe things like: “My father either loves me, or he doesn't.” “School is either great or horrible” “If I'm not perfect at something, I'm a failure at it” “Either I feel angry, or I don't”. "It has to be perfect, or it is a mess." You don't think about the “grey”, that is, you don't acknowledge that there is something between love and hate, or perfection and failure, or first and last. You often don't allow to feel or do things in degrees either.

2. OVER GENERALIZING:

You view a single event as proof that any similar event will turn out the same way. For example, you reason that because one man or woman acted hurtfully, all men or women must behave that way. You judged one purchase from this store “bad” then conclude you will find them all bad.

3. DEMANDS:

You make big demands of yourself, other people, or the world. You do this thinking that there is an absolute right and wrong, and often words like should, shouldn't, must, ought, cant's, or have to are part of the way you think or speak. You say things to yourself and others like, "They should have done this," or "They shouldn't have done that,I have to do this," or, "I ought to do that."

4. MENTAL FILTER:

You dwell on one positive or negative detail so your perception of the entire situation gets distorted--like a drop of ink that discolors an entire pitcher of water. You filter all new information through this distorted lens. You may only notice the things you think good about a friend, or dwell only on the things you consider bad about a change in your life

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5. DISCOUNTING CONTRARY INFORMATION:

Here, you play-down or minimize the importance of new information coming to you that seems to contradict your beliefs. For example, if a friend says something nice about you, you might not accept the compliment actually means anything because you believe friends have to say nice things to each other whether they mean them or not.

6. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS:

- (a) **Mind reading.** You assume you know what others think and why they do what they do when you have no proof.
- (b) **Fortune-telling.** You make predictions that things can't change or will turn out badly, or that they will change only for the better.
- (c) **Invented causation.** If you don't know why something happened, you invent a cause, or believe a previously invented cause. You may convince yourself of something without any evidence. This reduces anxiety, but it also stops any further investigation; it stops helpful learning and change.

7. MAGNIFYING OR MINIMIZING:

You blow things out of proportion or shrink their importance. We also call this "awfulizing" or "catastrophizing," if you have a negative focus, and "wishful thinking" or "magical thinking," if you have a positive focus.

8. EMOTIONAL REASONING:

You draw conclusions based on how you feel, instead of on logic and the facts. You might reason, for example, "I feel like he hates me, therefore he must." "I feel like a failure; therefore I must be one." "I feel sad, therefore I must be depressed." "I feel afraid, therefore I can't do it." "I don't feel like doing it, therefore, I can't."

9. LABELING:

You focus on labels (like "idiot, stupid, fool, loser") instead of pinpointing the cause of the problem so you can learn from it or work to correct it. You might call someone stupid because they have made a simple mistake, or you might call yourself a loser if you're not living up to your own expectations.

10. PERSONALIZING or BLAME:

You take things personally by considering yourself totally responsible for something you remain, for the most part, unable to respond to. You may have had little to do with getting an illness, getting divorced, getting a well-paying job, getting laid off, or your child's getting involved with drugs, yet praise or blame yourself. On the other hand, you may overlook the ways you contribute to a problem or success, then blame other people, external events, or fate.

* Adapted from Cognitive Therapy for Depression by Aaron Beck. It seems important to note that much of the work of Aaron Beck relates directly or indirectly to the earlier work of Dr. Albert Ellis.

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