

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

The way that we think about things affects how we are feeling. When a person experiences uncomfortable feelings (eg., low mood, anxiety), these feelings are usually preceded by unhelpful thoughts that seem to occur automatically and often without our awareness. Often there is a pattern to such thoughts and we call these, "unhelpful thinking styles". When a person consistently uses some of these styles of thinking, they can often cause themselves a great deal of emotional distress.

This information sheet describes a number of "unhelpful thinking styles". As you read them, see whether you notice any thinking patterns and styles that you use frequently. Some of these styles might sound similar to one another and you may find that you have thoughts that fit into a number of categories.

Mental Filter

This thinking style involves a sort of "tunnel vision," focusing on only one part of a situation and ignoring the rest. Usually this means looking at the negative parts of a situation and forgetting the positive parts, and the whole picture is coloured by what may be a single negative detail.

Eg., Lisa struggled to enjoy the romantic outing planned for her by her boyfriend as all she could think about was her bloated stomach.

Jumping to Conclusions

This type of thinking involves drawing conclusions without considering all the evidence.

Mind reading: We jump to conclusions when we assume that we know what someone else is thinking.

Eg., If anyone sees me eating a doughnut they'll think I am fat and lazy.

Emotional Reasoning: This thinking style involves basing your view of situations or yourself on the way you are feeling.

Eg., I know that I've gained weight because of how I'm feeling.

Predictive thinking: We also jump to conclusions when we make predictions about what is going to happen in the future (predictive thinking).

Eg. If I eat 3 meals and 3 snacks a day my weight will never stop going up.

Personalisation

This involves blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong or could go wrong, even when you may only be partly responsible or not responsible at all. You might be taking 100% responsibility for the occurrence of external events.

Eg., It is all my fault that I have an eating disorder.

Labelling

We label ourselves and others when we make global statements based on behaviour in specific situations. We might use this label even though there are many more examples that aren't consistent with that label.

Eg., I'm weak because I can't stop bingeing.



Catastrophising

Catastrophising occurs when we "blow things out of proportion", and we view the situation as terrible, awful, dreadful, and horrible, even though the reality is that the problem itself is quite small.

E.g., If I gain weight nobody will ever be attracted to me ever again.

Black and White Thinking

This thinking style involves seeing only one extreme or the other. It involves thinking that events and things can only be viewed as either wrong or right, good or bad and so on. There are no in-betweens or shades of grey.

E.g., Now that I've eaten one biscuit, I may as well eat all of them.

Shoulding and Musting

Sometimes by saying "I should..." or "I must..." you can put unreasonable demands or pressure on yourself and others. Although these statements are not always unhelpful (eg "I should not get drunk and drive home"), they can sometimes create unrealistic expectations.

E.g., I must never eat carbohydrates

Overgeneralisation

When we overgeneralise, we take one instance in the past or present, and impose it on all current or future situations. If we say "You always..." or "Everyone...", or "I never..." then we are probably overgeneralising.

E.g., Everything in my life is perfect when my body is in peak condition.

Disqualifying the Positives

In this thinking style, you minimise your personal positive attributes and achievements. It's as though you're explaining away your own positive characteristics or achievements as though they're not important.

E.g., I know that I've made some improvements to my eating, but they're too little too late.

For more information on challenging unhelpful thinking styles, see CCI's thought diary handouts on our website.