

# Recognizing Troublesome Thinking Patterns

Thinking is a very important and powerful tool, but it is far from perfect. Sometimes certain old patterns can intrude into the present and hijack our thinking, distorting our perceptions of reality. Even blatantly untrue thoughts can sometimes seem very convincing when we get lost in them.

Look through the list of troublesome thinking patterns below. Do you ever get hooked by any of these? The first step in working with them is to notice them for what they are. It is often easy to see other people engaging in these patterns, or even to laugh at how absurd they sound when you read them, but they can be hard to notice when you are caught up in them. Take a few minutes to consider each one of these patterns to see if you can recognize how they might show up in your own thinking at times. If any of these apply to you, make notes to yourself so you can get better at seeing the signs of when they hook your mind.

It is important not to judge yourself too harshly when you do notice you are thinking in one of these ways. It may very well be that you did experience a catastrophe in the past, or someone really did think what you thought they were thinking. The most important thing is to notice your thinking patterns and to see how well they fit your current situation. Remember, too, that everyone at some point in their lives experiences these different styles of thinking.

## CATASTROPHIZING

In this pattern of troublesome thinking, you get a small piece of bad news, and your mind carries you off to all kinds of other possible, though highly unlikely, scenarios that are much worse.

**Example:** "My friend is late. Maybe he was in a car accident. He could be hurt really badly. What if he never walks again? He has to walk at his job, so he won't be able to work anymore. He has two kids — how will he feed his family if he can't work? What if he can't pay his mortgage and they all become homeless?"

Can you think of an example of when you have done this in the past?

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Are there any areas of your life where you are doing this now?

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What are the situations in which you are most likely to think this way?

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### GENERALIZING

This pattern involves noticing one specific thing, situation, or quality, and automatically believing that it applies much more broadly. Nothing goes well all the time, but it doesn't mean everything will go badly all the time.

**Example:** "When I tried to fix the garage door, I completely messed it up. I just can't do anything right."

Can you think of an example of when you have done this in the past?

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### BLACK AND WHITE THINKING

Our brains often want to categorize things as this or that, good or bad, all or nothing, black or white. However, in reality, there are many shades of gray. There are variations in good and bad in every person, thing, and situation, and these can also change with time. Someone can be a nice person but still be somewhat selfish. Someone can be direct in ways that often come across as rude but still be a fairly decent person.

**Example:** "He called me to ask how I was doing when no one else did, so I thought he was the greatest guy on Earth. Now he's an hour late and hasn't bothered calling – turns out he's the biggest jerk on Earth."

Can you think of an example of when you have done this in the past?

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### **FOCUSING ON WEAKNESSES AND FORGETTING STRENGTHS**

Our brains have evolved to pay more attention to the negative. While this helps us survive threats, in modern society, it makes for a very pessimistic outlook on life. Nobody can be good at everything – we all have strengths as well as weaknesses. When you find yourself focusing on the faults of yourself or others, or seeing the worst in every situation, remind yourself that there are things you can do well, and that other people have at least a few good qualities.

**Example:** Forgetting all the hard work you did to raise a family and the skills it took you to survive countless crises, you think, "I'm such a loser for not being better at using computers."

Can you think of an example of when you have done this in the past?

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### **MIND READING**

Sometimes we think we know what another person is thinking, and then get upset that they are thinking that. In reality, we can never truly know what another person is thinking, and continuously trying to guess tends to get us worked up.

**Example:** "I worked really hard on my appearance today, and my boyfriend didn't say a word about it. I bet he thinks I'm ugly. He probably expects me to look like a TV model. What a shallow man! Who is he to judge me?! I don't need that jerk in my life!"

Can you think of an example of when you have done this in the past?

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### CRYSTAL BALL GAZING

This pattern of thinking involves getting caught up in endless “what if” scenarios in our minds, and getting upset by them. The truth is, we can never know the future with complete certainty, and even though bad things do happen, not every single bad thing we can think of will actually happen.

**Example:** “I really don’t want to give that speech at work tomorrow. Everyone is going to hate my ideas. They will attack me until I cry. I’ll probably get fired, and no other company will ever want to hire someone who got fired, so I’ll live out the rest of my life in poverty.”

Can you think of an example of when you have done this in the past?

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### PUTTING YOURSELF OR OTHERS IN A “NO-WIN” SITUATION

In our minds, we sometimes put ourselves or others into a “darned if you do, darned if you don’t” scenario. We somehow believe that whatever we or someone else does, it’s wrong. At the root of this, we feel a deep sense of frustration or anxiety, and since that feeling is not going away, we are dissatisfied with every choice.

**Self example:** “There’s no way I’m buying those big pants, I’m not that overweight. These blasted pants are too tight!”

**Other example:** When your child asks, “What’s for dinner,” you think, “Why doesn’t that lazy child just check for herself?” However, if she does go up to check the food, you think, “Why is she messing with my cooking?”

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### **"SHOULDING" AND "MUSTERBATION"**

The late Albert Ellis was quite a character. He would tell clients, "Stop shoulding all over yourself," and talk about the problems with "musterbation" (Ellis & Harper, 1975). Words such as "should" and "must" cause endless problems in human thinking. Alan Watts (2004) once told an apocryphal story that God was writing a dictionary of all the words that would be used in human language. However, when visiting the archangel Gabriel, he had left the dictionary in the taxi. The devil got into the taxi, found the dictionary, and inserted the words "ought" and "should."

Many of us have deep down beliefs about how the world should work and what we must do. However, life is often not fair, and there is nothing we can do to change the past. All humans make mistakes, so the best we can do is work to repair them, rather than beat ourselves up.

**Examples:** "This should never have happened to me." "I must always keep myself calm and together."

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### **CONFIRMATION BIAS**

In this type of distorted thinking, once you have an idea in your head, you pay attention to things that support your idea and ignore disconfirming evidence.

**Example:** If you have been cheated on in the past, you might be suspicious of your current partner. If he becomes less amorous with you, you suspect he is giving his affections to someone else. If he becomes more amorous, you suspect he has been stimulated by someone else. If he acts the same, you suspect he is hiding the fact that he is with someone else. In a sad, self-fulfilling prophecy, your paranoia actually drives a wedge in the relationship, making it more likely he will want to find someone else.

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**OLD, OBSOLETE, OR INAPPROPRIATE THINKING**

There are countless other unhelpful thinking patterns that can develop. Perhaps they were helpful in the past, or even now in certain situations.

**Example:** If you work in a job in which other businesses call you all day trying to sell you things, being cynical and putting up walls can help protect you from making bad purchases. But if you come home and are automatically cynical and defensive with your family, your relationships will suffer.

Can you think of an example of when you have done this in the past?

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