

Thinking Traps

What are thinking traps? They are patterns of thinking or habits of thought. They may be automatic. While the types of thinking traps identified by psychologists vary, some classic thinking traps are displayed in the table below. It is important to realize that these traps may exist at both the conscious and subconscious levels. You are not always aware of what is influencing your thinking. Examine common thinking traps below and reflect on ones you may fall into.

Review the list of common thinking traps that threaten to derail your emotions and behaviors. Think about which appear to be problems for you. You can evaluate them by thinking about upsetting events where these traps appear to have contributed to your perspective and negative emotions. Place a in the column, MY THINKING TRAPS, for any that appear to have relevance for you.

Think about these as either being based in fact or opinion.

Fact: There is solid and general evidence across situations to support this belief; rational basis for support; fact-based view

Opinion: Based on personal view, opinion, or emotion; lacks solid evidence for support; personal view may or may not have some basis in fact

THINKING TRAP	DEFINITION of TRAP	EXAMPLE of TRAP	CHALLENGE to TRAP	MY THINKING TRAPS
Fortunetelling	You predict that bad things will happen.	<i>"I know I'll mess up." "I will never be able to manage my anxiety during the conference."</i>	In reality, we cannot predict the future because we don't have a crystal ball!	<input type="checkbox"/>
Black-White Thinking	You only look at situations in terms of extremes. Things are viewed as either good or bad, a success or a failure.	<i>"Anything less than perfect is a failure for me." "I planned to exercise today as part of my new health regimen but had to work late. Now, my plan is totally ruined! I'll never get healthy."</i>	Most events call for a more "moderate" or middle of the road view. One instance of a behavior does not negate all of your good efforts.	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Mind Reading	You believe you know what others are thinking and assume they are thinking the worst of you.	<i>"Others think I'm stupid."</i> <i>"I know my boss doesn't like me."</i>	No one can read minds, so you really can't know what others are thinking.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Over-Generalization	You tend to use words such as "always" or "never" to describe situations or events.	<i>"I always make mistakes."</i> <i>"I am never good at public speaking."</i> <i>"I will never win."</i>	This type of thinking is not helpful because it does not take all situations or events into account. It uses extreme language and moves from specific instance to all instances.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Labeling	You use negative self-talk and single words to describe or label yourself	<i>"I am stupid."</i> <i>"I'm a bad teacher."</i> <i>"I am a poor parent."</i>	This is unfair and not helpful thinking that reduces your complex human behavior to a single word.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Over-Estimating Danger	You believe that something that is unlikely to happen is really right around the corner.	<i>"I will faint."</i> <i>"I'll go crazy."</i> <i>"I'll embarrass myself and be fired."</i>	This thinking maintains anxiety as you expect something bad to happen. Just because something could happen does not mean it will happen. What is the actual likelihood it will happen?	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Filtering	You focus your attention only on the bad things that happen and ignore all the good things. This tilts your perspective toward the negative, creating an unbalanced view of a situation.	<p>“They don’t buy what I’m saying.”</p> <p>“I’m not good at leading circle. Did you see all the kids playing with the toys?”</p> <p>“My activities aren’t engaging children. I saw a child fidgeting the whole time.”</p>	It may be true that some children may have been distracted during circle for any number of reasons, most children really seemed to enjoy learning from you.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Catastrophizing	You imagine that the worst possible thing is about to happen, and you predict that you won’t be able to cope with the outcome.	<p>“I’ll freak out and no one will help.”</p> <p>“I’m going to make such a fool of myself, everyone will laugh at me, and I won’t be able to survive the embarrassment.”</p>	The imagined worst-case scenario usually never happens. If it did happen, most likely you would be able to cope with it.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Should Statements (Icebergs)	You use self-statements that include how you “should”, “must”, or “ought” to feel and behave.	<p>“I should never feel anxious.”</p> <p>“I must control my feelings.”</p> <p>“I should never make mistakes.”</p> <p>“I should be a perfect caregiver.”</p>	Chances are, this is not how you actually feel nor how you actually behave. Imperative words like “should” imply absolute standards that make you anxious and disappointed with yourself or others.	<input type="checkbox"/>