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Thinking styles (aka Cognitive Distortions or Thinking Errors) are exaggerated or irrational thought patterns which have a negative impact on our emotional frame of mind and the way we react to situations. Usually when feeling anxious or depressed you will find these thinking styles to be more common.

1. Black-and-white thinking

When thinking in black-and-white, we tend to see everything in terms of good or bad. Either you're great, or you're a loser; if you don't look like a model you must be ugly; if you do something wrong then you are completely bad. Everything is all or nothing, it's always like this, it's never like that, why don't good things ever happen to me?

THE CHALLENGE: Look for shades of grey

It is important to avoid thinking about things in terms of extremes. Most things aren't black-and-white, usually they are somewhere in-between. Just because something isn't completely perfect, it doesn't mean that it's a complete write-off.

Ask yourself:

• Is it really so bad, or am I seeing things in black-and-white?

• How else can I think about the situation?

•Am I saying always, never, good, bad, right, wrong?

• Am I taking an extreme view?

2. Unreal ideal / unfair to compare

Another common thinking style is making unfair comparisons. When doing this, people compare themselves with people who have a specific advantage in some area, or perhaps comparing the good points of them, with the negative points of themselves. Making unfair comparisons can leave people feeling inadequate.

THE CHALLENGE: Stop making unfair comparisons

Ask yourself:

• Am I comparing myself with people who have a particular advantage?

• Am I making fair comparisons?

•What aspects of this am I good at?

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3. Negative Filter / Negative Focus

When we filter we do two things: firstly, to hone in on the negative aspects of the situation and secondly, ignore or dismiss all the positive aspects.

THE CHALLENGE: Consider the whole picture

Ask yourself:

• Am I looking at the negatives, while ignoring the positives?

• Is there a more balanced way to look at this?

• Would everyone take the same viewpoint?

4. Personalising / The Self-Blame Game

When personalising, you can feel responsible for things that go wrong, even if they're not your fault or responsibility.

THE CHALLENGE: It's not always about you

It's important to consider that not everything is your fault or your responsibility. Most things have more than one cause.

Ask yourself:

• Am I really to blame? Is this all about me?

• What other explanations might there be for this situation?

5. Mind-reading

We often think we know what other people are thinking. We may assume that others are focused on our faults and weaknesses. This can happen as a result of a certain look or tone of voice which seems to justify the interpretation about what people may be thinking, though often without any real or factual evidence. Similarly, like mind-reading we may predict what actions a person may take based on our previous experiences, but the past does not predict the future and when we give people the opportunity to perform outside of our judgements of them, we can often be surprised.

THE CHALLENGE: Don't assume that you know what others are thinking

Ask yourself:

• What is the evidence? Is the evidence fact or opinion? Would the evidence stand the scrutiny of court?

• How do I know what other people are thinking?

• Just because I assume something, does that mean I'm right?

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6. Catastrophising

When we catastrophise, we exaggerate the consequences or look at the worst case scenario. Often when things go wrong, we may imagine that things will be disastrous. Other times we may think the worst will happen if undertaking certain actions or conversations with others.

THE CHALLENGE: De-catastrophise

Ask yourself:

• What's could I do to prevent or deal with the worst case scenario?

• What's the best thing that can happen?

• What's the most likely to happen in reality?

• Will this matter in five years time?

• Is there anything good about the situation?

• Is there any way to fix the situation?

7. Over-Generalising

When you over-generalise you exaggerate the frequency of negative things in your life, like mistakes, disapproval and failures. Typically you might think to yourself: 'I always get it wrong' 'people are horrible' or 'good things never seem to happen to me'.

THE CHALLENGE: Be specific - don't over-generalise

Ask yourself:

• Am I overgeneralising?

• Is this true for everyone?

• Is it always or never or are there exceptions ?

• What are the facts in what I'm saying or thinking?

8. Fact versus feeling/thinking

Sometimes you might confuse your thought or feelings with reality. You might assume, 'if I think or feel this way then my thoughts/feelings must be correct'.

THE CHALLENGE: Stick to the facts

Ask yourself:

• Am I confusing my feelings with the facts?

• Just because I am feeling this way, does that mean my perceptions are correct?

• Am I thinking this way just because I am feeling bad right now and vice versa?

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9. Labelling

When you use labelling you might call yourself (or other people) names. Instead of being specific (e.g. that was a silly thing to say') you make negative generalisations about yourself or other people e.g. I am ugly/ dumb/ a loser/ boring; She is failure, He's a complete idiot.

THE CHALLENGE: Is this the whole of me/ the person

Ask yourself:

• Is this all I am/ they are?

• Just because there is something I'm unhappy with, does that mean that I'm totally no good?

10. Jumping to Conclusions/ Predicting the Future

This may present in the way of "what if" thoughts, focussing on the worst possible outcome or making assumptions about people and situations i.e thinking someone has mal intent without knowing or finding their reasons for them undertaking certain actions.

THE CHALLENGE: Get the facts

Remind yourself:

• It's ok to ask someone why they have done something

Ask yourself:

• Have you got all the facts?

• Is there another reason X happened?

• What is the opposite prediction that might happen

Living by fixed rules

We all have fixed rules and unrealistic expectations that cause excessive anxiety, stress or guilt. One way to recognise them is when we say "I should/ must/ have to or ought to" People generally have such thoughts when they try to live by personal rules and standards that may be set by ourselves, others and society at large. However fixed rules tend to be excessively rigid and over demanding and have no real application to the situation.

Ask yourself:

• Am I saying "I should/ must/ have to or ought to"

• Replace "should" with "could"

•What will happen if I don't?

•Who says I should do this, and are they right?