

Unhelpful thinking styles

When a person experiences an unhelpful emotion (e.g. depression or anxiety), it is usually preceded by a number of unhelpful self-statements and thoughts. Often there is a pattern to such thoughts, and we call these “unhelpful thinking styles”. People may use these styles as an automatic habit, outside their awareness. When used consistently, they can cause a great deal of emotional distress. As you read, notice any patterns you use regularly. Some styles may sound similar: they are not meant to be distinct categories, but to help you recognise patterns in your thoughts.

Mental filter

This thinking style involves a “filtering in” and “filtering out” process—a sort of “tunnel vision”, focusing on 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; the whole picture is coloured by what may be a single negative detail.

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 (e.g. “I should not get drunk and drive home”), they can sometimes create unrealistic expectations.

Jumping to conclusions

We jump to conclusions when we assume that we know what someone else is thinking (mind reading), and when we make predictions about what is going to happen in the future (predictive thinking).

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...”, “Everyone...”, or “I never...”, then we are probably overgeneralising.

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.

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 are not consistent with that label.

Catastrophising

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

Emotional reasoning

This thinking style involves basing your view of situations or yourself on the way you are feeling. For example, the only evidence that something bad is going to happen is that you feel like something bad is going to happen.

Black & white thinking

This thinking style involves seeing only one extreme or the other. You are either wrong or right, good or bad, and so on. There are no in-betweens or shades of grey.

Magnification and minimisation

In this thinking style, you magnify the positive attributes of other people and minimise your own positive attributes. It is as though you are explaining away your own positive characteristics.