Get Out of Your Thinking Trap

What to Know

There are ways of thinking that can trigger thoughts of suicide. Called "thinking traps," you might find them difficult to escape. Let's look at some of these common thinking traps and how you can sidestep them.

Consider what happens when an animal gets caught in a physical trap. This is a bad situation because there's no way out for the animal. Maybe it views the pain of the trap as unbearable and gives up hope of *ever* escaping. The same thing can happen to you if you get caught in thinking traps. You may believe you're stuck in a terrible situation. The emotional pain might be unbearable, and you may believe there's no hope of things ever getting better. You might feel so terrible that you think the only escape is suicide. The following are common thinking traps.

• **Catastrophizing**: Thinking that something is much worse than it is because the situation is blown so out of proportion, leading to feeling hopeless. Here are some examples:

- Because I failed the test, I'll never get into a good college!
- I can't ever show my face at school again because I embarrassed myself at lunch.
- My brother yelled at me this morning, so now the whole day is ruined.

• **All-or-nothing thinking**: Thinking in extremes, unaware of a "middle ground" or in-between points. Situations are either all good or all bad, all right or all wrong, and awesome or terrible. All-or-nothing thinking sounds like the following examples.

- If I don't win the game, I'm a complete failure.
- If I can't feel happy all the time, I'd rather be dead.
- Because my friend said something hurtful, he's a terrible person.

• **Jumping to conclusions**: Assuming things will go bad when there's no evidence to support this. One example of this is "mind reading," or assuming you know what others are thinking. If you believe a situation will go badly, then you may avoid the situation or not try – making it more likely that the situation will go badly! Here are some examples.

- If my friends see me sitting alone, they'll think I'm a loser.
- There's no point in talking to her because I already know what she'll say.
- My teacher gave me a bad grade—they hate me.

• **Discounting the positive:** Denying positive experiences, overlooking and ignoring good things, and coming up with ways to explain away good things as untrue or unimportant. Here are some examples.

- I'm not that smart, I'm just lucky.
- Even though I feel better now, my depression is going to come back.
- I only got invited to the party because they feel sorry for me – not because they actually like me!

• **Demanding perfection:** When you set impossible standards for yourself, you'll never be able to meet them, so you'll never feel good enough. Perfectionism keeps you focused on what you don't have instead of the good things you *do* have. Perfectionism sounds like the following statements.

- I'm a failure because I missed two questions on the exam.
- I hate myself because my social media posts don't get many "likes."
- I quit playing tennis because if I can't do it perfectly, I won't do it at all.

• **Playing the blame game:** Unfairly blaming yourself for things that are outside of your control, resulting in feeling guilty and inadequate. A form of this is *personalization* or believing that what others say or do is directly connected to you when it isn't – leading you to feeling offended, neglected, or upset. Here are some examples.

- My family hates me. They'd be better off if I were dead.
- Two girls in my class are whispering. They must be making fun of me.
- My dad tries to embarrass me whenever we are out in public.

What to Do

Circle the thinking traps you have gotten caught up in:

- Catastrophizing
- All-or-nothing thinking
- Jumping to conclusions
- Discounting the positive
- Demanding perfection
- Playing the blame game

Can you think of other thinking traps you've gotten caught in? Write them down.

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Think of specific examples of when you've been caught in a thinking trap and write them down below.

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Just because you've gotten caught in thinking traps in the past doesn't mean you'll always get caught in them. And if you do get caught again, it doesn't mean you're a failure. Learn from the experience so you'll be less likely to get caught again!

Here are some tips for avoiding common thinking traps.

1. **Decatastrophize.** Write down a negative thought you're having.

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What evidence supports this thought, and what evidence contradicts it? Write down evidence for and against your thought.

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How probable is it that this negative thought is true? Write down a number from 0 (not true at all) to 100 (absolutely true): _____

Remember the difference between probable and possible. Many things are possible, (there's a chance they could be true), but just because something is possible doesn't mean it's true or that it's definitely going to happen. Probable means it's likely true or the chances are high that it will happen.

If this thought is true, what's the worst that could happen? And if the worst did happen, what could I do to cope?

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The worst-case scenario may be unpleasant, unsatisfying, embarrassing, painful, and so on. But it's rarely catastrophic.

2. Reality Testing. Write down statements or beliefs that commonly trigger thinking traps.

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Are these statements or beliefs accurate or "real"? Why or why not?

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3. Be a Reporter, Not a Forecaster. When you jump to conclusions, you assume you know how a situation will turn out in the absence of evidence. The same with mind reading—you assume you know what others are thinking. When you jump to conclusions or mind read, you act like a weather forecaster, trying to predict something that may or may not happen. Try the following:

• Predict the winning lottery numbers.

• Forecast the weather one month from today.

• Look at someone across the room and guess what they're thinking about.

• Guess a stranger's favorite food.

If you catch yourself jumping to conclusions, remind yourself to wait for the results and focus on the facts. Reporters explain what's happening or has happened without trying to predict the future.

Describe a situation where you can be a reporter, not a forecaster.

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Reflections on This Exercise

What was challenging about this exercise? Be specific.

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Did anything surprise you about this activity? If so, describe.

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How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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