

Unhelpful thinking styles

When we are stressed, depressed or just feel under pressure, our thoughts can become very distressing to us. Remember, when our 'Threat Brain' is engaged, our thoughts become full of threat. Our problem solving, logical and creative brain literally takes a back seat and we see, predict and evaluate situations in a threatening way to us. Sometimes we literally 'see' our thoughts as images, pictures in our heads. Can you spot any of the common thinking styles below that you experience when stressed or down?

All-or-Nothing It's either this or that, black or white, no in-between. Thoughts feel 100% certain, with no room for doubt that they aren't true.

Example: "I always mess up when I talk to new people"

Jumping to Conclusions by predicting things will go wrong based on little or no evidence.

Example: "If I go out whilst I am off work with stress and someone sees me, I'll get the sack"

Catastrophising blowing events out of proportion catastrophically by predicting imminent danger for ourselves or significant others. Our mind tends to predict the 'worst case scenarios', often accompanied by distressing images of something bad happening.

Example: "Oh my god, I'm going to collapse if I don't get out of here"

Judgemental Labelling judging yourself according to how you feel. Harsh self-criticisms and comparing self negatively to others. This often happens also when trying to 'mind read' others by guessing what they think of us, and usually coming to a negative conclusion

Example: "I'm a totally pathetic, what must my family think of me?"

Should, Must or Ought rigid statements or rules we have that set for ourselves. We often then judge ourselves harshly by if we don't live up to them. These can be quite perfectionist in nature, and are often rules we wouldn't necessarily judge others by

Example: "I should be dealing better with stress, it doesn't affect others like this"

These thinking styles often merge together, so there is often not a 'right' answer for matching your thoughts to. Being self critical is actually the thinking style that covers all of the above. Have a go at identifying the extreme thinking you get, *even though* your mind may be giving you self critical thoughts about getting it 'right'. Identifying the thoughts as unhelpful is more important in therapy than they type of thought it is. Watch out also for the processes below which are very unhelpful, and are a target for therapy

Unhelpful thinking processes

When our threat brain is engaged, we find it hard to focus and attend to what is happening in situations. Our minds become engaged in worry and rumination as we tend to 'overthink' what might happen or what we think has happened

Worry – characterised by "what if" type thoughts and images of what might happen. The mind *overthinks events that haven't actually happened yet fuelling anxiety and more worry*

Example: "What if I look like or sound an idiot at the night out"

Rumination – reliving and overanalysing situations and linking negative memories and views of self, seeking an answer to 'why' questions. The mind *overthinks meanings in situations and links them to our past negative experiences or memories, fuelling doubt and low mood*

Example: Linking the worry example to a bad memory and into a belief that "I'm worthless", and seeing an image of yourself as alone, asking yourself "why am I like this"