

Common Unhelpful Thought Patterns

(adapted from Antoni et al., 2002)

A. ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING (BLACK & WHITE THINKING):

You label things as fully one way or the other. With this way of thinking, you discount in-betweens or gray areas. All-or-nothing comes from trying to be perfect. When aiming for perfection, you fear any mistake or imperfection because if your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure. Then you may feel inadequate and worthless. This type of thinking is often unrealistic because life is rarely completely one way or the other.

Examples of all-or-nothing thinking are:

- “I must do this fully, or I may as well not do it at all.”
 - “I can’t make dinner like he does so I might as well not cook at all.”
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B. OVER-GENERALIZATION:

You apply a single event to all future instances. You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. You conclude that something that happened to you once will occur over and over again. Since what happened is usually unpleasant, you feel upset.

For example, you might say:

- “Last time I tried this it didn’t work, so this time it probably won’t work either.”
 - “No one understands what I/we are going through.”
 - “We didn’t see great results on the last scan, so this one probably won’t be good either.”
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C. LABELING OR MISLABELING:

This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Personal labeling means creating a completely negative self-image based on one mistake. Instead of describing your mistake (“I messed up”), you attach a negative label to yourself (“I’m stupid”). We also do this to other people, such as when someone’s behavior rubs us the wrong way and we attach a negative label (“What a fool”). If someone makes a mistake, it’s just a mistake. It does not mean that we, or others, are bad or stupid.

Examples of thoughts in this category are:

- “I’m terrible at this.”
 - “I can’t do anything right.”
 - “The doctor made a mistake, he/she doesn’t care about us.”
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D. MAGNIFICATION (CATASTROPHIZING) OR MINIMIZATION:

You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your mistake or someone else's achievement) or you inappropriately shrink the relevance of things (your own desirable qualities or another person's imperfections).

- **Magnification** occurs when you look at a situation and *blow it out of proportion*.

For example:

- "I can't do this or anything by myself, nothing will go right for me."
- "I'll never be able to manage on my own."
- "My loved one won't understand what I am going through."
- "It is all downhill from here."

- **Minimizing** occurs when you look at your strengths or at the positive points of a situation and *minimize their significance*.

For example, you may:

- Minimize your personal achievements by ignoring the importance of something you accomplished.
- Say, "I doubt that this treatment is even working," or "I can't do anything about his/her symptoms, so I might as well not bring it up to anyone or get any help"

E. DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE:

You *reject positive experiences* by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or other. This way, you can maintain a negative belief. An everyday example of this is the way that some people tend to respond to compliments. We are conditioned to respond to compliments and when someone praises your work, clothes or appearance you might automatically tell yourself, "They are just being nice." Disqualifying the positive *is one of the most destructive examples of negative thinking*. The take-home message is, "I am second-rate and not worthy".

- **For example**, when someone says, "you are doing a great job taking care of your loved one," you think, "that's just what I do" or "what choice do I have."
- **Or for instance**, you focus only on the things you miss out on now that your loved one has cancer and ignore anything meaningful that may come out of it, such as spending more time together, or focusing more on what matters rather than quarreling about minor details.

F. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS:

You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite or convincing facts that support your conclusion. There are two types of this: "mind reading" and the "fortune teller error."

- **Mind Reading:** You immediately conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don't bother to check this out. For example, you make the assumption that other people are

looking down at you and you are so convinced of this that you don't even bother to see if that is true.

- **For example**, you are walking around Boston and you pass a friend on the street. Your friend is so absorbed in her own thoughts that she doesn't notice you and neglects to say hello. You automatically conclude: "She is ignoring me. She must be angry at me."
- **Other examples** are thoughts that, "the doctor won't understand her symptoms so it's not worth bringing them up," or "I won't ask how my loved one is doing emotionally because he/she probably won't want to talk about it," or assuming a friend is "too busy to help" without actually asking the friend.
- **The Fortune Teller Error:** You anticipate that things will turn out badly and feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact. It is like having a crystal ball that predicts only misery for you. *You imagine that something bad is going to happen*, and you take this prediction as a fact, even though it may be unrealistic.

For example:

- "If I call the doctor again, they are sure to think that I am a nuisance, and then my loved one won't get good care."
- "I can't tell my loved one that I am having a hard time because it will make her worry and that will negatively affect her recovery."
- "If I go out to dinner with my friends I am sure to feel annoyed because they don't understand what I am going through."
- "If the last few MRI scans looked okay, the next scan is likely to be bad because we are 'due' for bad news."

G. SHOULD STATEMENTS:

You try to motivate yourself with "shoulds" and "should nots," as if you had to be punished before you could be expected to do anything. "Musts" and "oughts" are also offenders. This results in emotions of guilt and blame. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment. When you tell yourself that you should do this or that, you are putting pressure on yourself and start to get resentful.

Common examples are:

- "I should be able to do this all by myself. I should not ask for help."
- "I shouldn't have to ask for help. People should know what I need and if they don't, it means they just don't care about me."