



Unhelpful Thinking Traps

Black & White/All-or-Nothing Thinking

Our brain is trying to make something into a neat, clean (and probably unhelpful) category. This could be – Things are good or bad, something is safe or dangerous, you either get an A or you fail. When this occurs, we do not have any middle ground.

Negative filter

To stay safe – our brains like to pay attention to things that could be dangerous. Sometimes we are too good at it and all we can see is the negative. When this occurs, we start to feel like everything is going wrong, that nobody likes us or that we are total screw-ups.

Overgeneralization

To save time, our brains will take one piece of information and use it to predict a whole bunch of stuff. For example, if we get a bad grade on a test, we now believe we will never succeed. If we deviate from our diet/workout plan we will never lose weight. One unpleasant thing becomes the only thing we need to predict a totally unpleasant future.

Personalization

This is our tendency to place ourselves in the center of things. This shortcut makes it feel like things are about us. If your friend looks upset, our brain assumes we did something wrong. If someone doesn't agree with you, they are trying to make you upset.

Catastrophizing

This shortcut jumps to the worst-case scenario and makes it seem as if there is no hope. If someone doesn't call you back, then the friendship must be over. If you forget to turn in an assignment on time then you are going to flunk out (or get fired).

Perfectionism/Unrealistic Expectations

When we ask ourselves to be perfect, we don't leave room for error (or learning). This shortcut sets the best as the only acceptable outcome. While this may be a good strategy sometimes, constantly use it sets us up for frustration, disappointment and undue stress.

Mind Reading

Even though we know we can't read minds, our brains like to try anyways. This shortcut makes assumptions about what someone is thinking/feeling and then acts as if that is the truth.

Minimizing the Good

This occurs when you maximize your focus on failure and minimize any success. By discounting the positive and making the negative count more – we constantly put ourselves in a place of punishment.

Blaming

This shortcut places the cause of problem solely on the other person (and ignores any role you may have played). You expect the other person to change or fix things when there are also things you could do.