Thinking Traps
Thinking Traps

Thinking traps (also referred to as “cognitive distortions”) are errors in thinking that cause problematic thoughts, which are associated with negative emotions. We tend to be more likely to fall into thinking traps when we are under stress. The following is a list of common thinking traps that you may be engaging in without being aware. As you read through, reflect on your own thinking patterns and responses to different situations to assess which of these thinking traps you are most likely to fall into.

Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing is when you think that a situation is going to have the worst possible outcome despite the odds of that outcome being quite low or despite there being little evidence to support the possibility of that outcome. For example, you are running late for work for the first time and you think, “I’m going to get fired.” This is catastrophizing because it’s highly unlikely that you will be fired from work for being late once, you’re thinking of the worst outcome for the situation. Similarly, probability overestimating is when you overestimate the likelihood of a particular outcome. For example, you may avoid leaving your house because you think there is a high likelihood that you will be accosted or mugged on the street when in reality this is a very rare occurrence.

Overgeneralizing

Overgeneralizing happens when you make a broad generalization or label yourself or someone else using little information or when you see a pattern based on a single event. For example, you trip on the stairs at the shopping mall one day and think, “I’m such a klutz.” You are using this one instance to conclude that you are a clutz and ignoring all of the evidence suggesting that you are not a clutz (e.g., you walk up stairs every day without tripping), you’re overgeneralizing.

Filtering Out the Positive

Problematic thoughts sometimes come up when we fail to recognize positive aspects of a situation and instead focus on the negative aspects or what went wrong. You may feel that one negative outweighs ten positives, and thus you disregard or “filter out” positive information. For example, you hold an important meeting at work to introduce a new project. The meeting goes really well and everyone seems positive about the plan. However, one employee has a question that you are unable to answer and you will have to get back to them later. You feel unhappy and frustrated with yourself that you were unable to answer the question, despite the fact that the meeting as a whole was a success. In this case, you’ve filtered out all the positive aspects of the situation, and are focusing on a small negative.

All-Or-Nothing Thinking

Seeing situations in black and white terms, without acknowledging nuance or gray areas, is all-or-nothing thinking. For example, you decide to take a course at the local college and you get a B instead of an A, you think to yourself “I didn’t get an A, I’m a failure”. You didn’t acknowledge any gray area or consider other reasons for why you may not have gotten an A. Perhaps you had a difficult time balancing work and school or maybe you simply need to hone some of your study techniques. The automatic conclusion that you’re a failure is all-or-nothing thinking.
Mind Reading
Mind reading is when you make an assumption about what someone else is thinking with little supporting evidence or confirmation from the person. For example, you make eye contact with someone who is laughing to herself on the bus, you instantly think “she thinks I look funny.” That’s mind reading because you are making an assumption about what someone else is thinking with no evidence or confirmation to support your assumption. When people engage in mind reading, they tend to overestimate the degree to which others’ thoughts and actions are directed towards them – more often than not, people are thinking more about themselves and their lives than they are about the strangers on the bus.

Personalization
Personalization is when you assign responsibility to people for something that is not entirely within their control or that are the result of many factors. This can include blaming yourself for something that wasn’t completely your fault or blaming other people for something that was, in some way, your fault. For example, your coworker is unable to cover one of your shifts, you think, “it’s his fault that I can’t attend my friend’s birthday.” This is personalization because it is not your coworker’s responsibility to cover your shift and it is not their fault that you cannot attend your friend’s birthday party.

Adapted from: