

Week 2/Video 3: Unhelpful Thinking Styles

When we conceptualize automatic thoughts, we can often place them into a number of common categories or styles of thinking that everyone engages in. When I say everyone, I mean everyone, not just people who struggle with depression. These ways of thinking are so common, in fact, that we have names for them.

On page 18 in your workbook we will review these common unhelpful thinking patterns:

All or Nothing Thinking, sometimes called black or white thinking, often does not take in the bigger picture of the situation and gets focused on absolutes. So, an example might be, because “If I’m not perfect, I have failed.”

Overgeneralizing, is seeing a pattern based on a single event. So an example of this would be if you hear yourself use language like, “nothing good ever happens to me,” or “this always happens.” This and other thinking patterns are easy to spot if you are listening to the kinds of words you are using, if you’re using absolutes or guilt language it is a good indication that you are employing an unhelpful thinking pattern.

Mental Filter, research shows that humans are primed to pay attention to information that already fits within their perspective. Mental Filtering means you are only looking for certain information. I like to image the mental filter as a force field around you that bounces any info that goes against your beliefs away from you. So, if you believe that you are not a good communicator, you’re only going to look for evidence or allow evidence in that supports this belief.

Disqualifying the Positives involves finding a reason to discount the good things that have happened or that you have done. So, let’s image your belief is that you are not a good communicator and that you then receive feedback from your favorite professor that you did really well on your presentation and that they were impressed by your poise. That information got through the mental filter but then you discount it, maybe saying, “Oh this professor is just really nice” or “this class is just really easy.”

Jumping to Conclusions, this unhelpful thinking pattern along with Catastrophizing are the ones that are typically very present in anxiety. Jumping to Conclusions has two parts: Mind Reading- where you assume you know what other people are thinking or feeling about you, and Fortune Telling – where you are making predictions about the future or get stuck thinking about all the things that could happen in a way that is not helping you prepare

Magnification, which we often call Catastrophizing, involves making things bigger or more dangerous than they are. Remember anxiety often causes us to make the problem bigger than it is and makes us believe that we do not have the capability to manage the problem – even if we can. Conversely, Minimization occurs when we inappropriately shrink the importance of something. I often see this with students who minimize their needs or their hurts in order to keep peace with others.

Emotional Reasoning occurs when we feel a certain way and assume that because we feel this way what we are thinking must be true. So, an example might be feeling embarrassed about something and assuming that you're a "loser."

The Shoulds: Using critical words like "should," "must," or "ought to" lead to guilt or feeling like you are never doing enough or can never be enough. Be careful not to should all over yourself – it doesn't help with motivation, it just keeps you stuck. Remembering you have options and can make choices is very helpful when this thought pattern arises.

Labeling: Assigning labels to ourselves or other people is typically destructive and keeps us stuck. For example, if you tell yourself that you are a "loser" all the time, not only will that feel horrible but it will shape your decisions and approach to life. Because the loser doesn't go after the career they want, the loser doesn't take risks, the loser doesn't go and talk to that cutie at the bar. The language we use to talk about ourselves and others will shape our perspective and our world.

And lastly, **Personalization** refers to when you take on too much responsibility for something that is not completely your responsibility. Conversely, you might also not take enough responsibility for things in which you are responsible for.

Now that you have a sense of what each thinking style is, take a minute to identify in some way (star, circle, or highlight, whatever works for you) the ones you tend to use. This may include all of them, it may be just a few.

When you're done identifying your go to unhelpful thinking patterns, go back to your homework or to an example of the cross-sectional formation to identify if any of the automatic thoughts you recorded fall within any of these categories.

And lastly, before moving on to the next video, I would also encourage you to consider how you can keep this paper handy to remind you to check-in with yourself and notice what kind of thinking patterns you are using. One suggestion is to keep a picture of it on your phone for quick reference.