

ATTENTIVE  
HEALTH

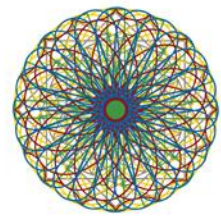
# healthy thinking skills

Research shows that how or what we think directly affects our moods and how we feel. Contrary to popular belief, events or situations do not determine your mood. Instead, how you think about the event or situation typically determines mood. Two people can face the same circumstances or event and have very different reactions. That's because the event is interpreted in the mind – and how you think about something affects how you feel about it. This relationship between thinking and feeling has been acknowledged in both ancient and modern times.

The good news is that if thinking affects our feelings, then we can change how we feel by changing how we think. Because thinking and feeling are so automatic, they seem like things that can't be changed, but thinking is a skill that can be practiced and strengthened, and feelings can be better controlled if we take the time to learn how.

Don't get stuck! You are constantly making decisions, taking action, and thinking thoughts that can change your perspective and your life. Inaccurate or irrational thinking is a major cause of negative moods such as sadness, anger, anxiety and guilt. Developing healthy thinking skills can help change those negative thought patterns and moods into positive ones. Here are some ideas on specific skills to work on:

1. **be precise in your thinking**. Instead of "I always mess up", think: "I didn't get it right this time".
2. **avoid words that are imperatives**: words like "Always", "Never", "Should", "Must".
3. **react to what is real not imagined**. React to the actual situation at hand, not the worst situation that you can conjure up in your mind.
4. **instead of guessing** or mind-reading about what others think about you or need from you, **ask**.
5. **consider the whole**. Instead of focusing on a single negative detail about yourself or others, try to balance your view with the positive. A balanced perspective will likely be more realistic and keep your mood balanced too.
6. **just because you feel something, doesn't make it true**. If you feel stupid, it doesn't mean that you are stupid. If you feel guilty, it doesn't necessarily mean that you are. Feelings come from thoughts, and if your thoughts are inaccurate or misguided, your feelings may be as well.
7. **fairness is relative, not absolute**. What you think is fair is guided by you: your needs, wants, responsibilities, etc. Other people's standard of fairness is also guided by their needs, wants, responsibilities... and the two often do not agree. Expecting people to agree with you about what is important or fair will ultimately build resentment and impair relationships.
8. **it's not always about you**. Thinking that things that happen around you are related to you can create unhealthy thinking and moods. Looking for your self-worth in comparison to others is an empty exercise that will leave you thinking and feeling that you don't measure up. Instead, let your own values and experiences be your guide.



## minding the “mind traps”

Everyone falls into unbalanced thinking traps from time to time. You’re most likely to distort your interpretation of things when you feel sad, angry, anxious, depressed or stressed. You’re also more vulnerable to thinking traps when you’re not taking good care of yourself, like when you’re not eating or sleeping well. See if you can recognize your own thinking traps in the list below. Note the styles that apply to you and the next time that you experience a negative mood, check to see if a distorted thinking pattern is in play.

types of traps		examples
<b>overgeneralizing</b>	Thinking that a negative situation or incident is part of a cycle of more bad things happening. 'Always' and 'never' are clues that this style of thinking may be affecting you.	<i>I wanted to go to the beach, but now it's raining. This always happens to me! I never get to do fun things!</i>
<b>black-and-white thinking</b>	Seeing things as only right or wrong, good or bad, perfect or terrible – without a middle ground. People who think in “black and white” terms see a small mistake as a total failure.	<i>I wanted to eat healthier, but I just had a piece of cake. This plan is a total failure! I might as well eat the whole cake now.</i>
<b>fortune-telling</b>	Expecting or predicting that something bad will happen, without evidence. You notice or hear about a problem and start “what if’s.”	<i>I've been studying hard, but I just know that I'm going to fail my test tomorrow.</i>
<b>emotional reasoning</b>	You believe that what you feel must be true— automatically – that bad feelings or emotions must reflect the truth. If you feel stupid or boring, then you must be stupid and boring. If you feel guilty, then you must have done something wrong.	<i>I feel anxious when I fly, so airplanes must not be safe.</i>
<b>labeling</b>	Saying negative things about yourself or other people as if they represent the whole truth of the person.	<i>I made a mistake at work... I'm so stupid! My boss told me I made a mistake... my boss is a jerk!</i>
<b>shoulds</b>	Telling yourself how you “should” or “must” act. Because of this, you are often in the position of judging and finding fault (in yourself and in others).	<i>I should be able to handle this without getting upset and crying!</i>
<b>mind-reading</b>	Jumping to conclusions about what other people are thinking, without them saying so. Oftentimes, we imagine that people feel the same way we do and react to things the same way we do.	<i>My friend didn't stop to say hello. She must be mad at me or doesn't like me now.</i>

types of traps		examples
<b>filtering</b>	Taking negative details and magnifying them, while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation. A single detail may be picked out, and the whole event becomes colored by this detail, making them more awful than they really are.	<i>I met a lot of great people at the party, but one guy didn't talk to me. There must be something wrong with me.</i>
<b>personalizing</b>	This is the tendency to relate everything around you to yourself. For example, thinking that everything people do or say is some kind of reaction to you. You may also compare yourself to others, trying to determine who's smarter, better looking, etc.	<i>My supervisor reminded our whole department about how to do the job. He must not think I can do this job.</i>

## OTHER EXAMPLES OF THINKING TRAPS

- **blaming:** Holding other people responsible for your pain, or blaming yourself for every problem.
- **control fallacies:** There are two ways we can distort our sense of power and control. One is to see yourself as helpless, a victim of fate. Feeling this way keeps you stuck, but the truth is that we are constantly making decisions, and that every decision affects our lives. On the other hand, the fallacy of internal control is where you feel responsible for the pain and happiness of everyone around you, resulting in exhaustion (and feeling guilty when you cannot keep everyone happy).
- **fallacy of fairness:** Sometimes we feel resentful because we think we know what's fair, but other people don't agree with us. It is tempting to make assumptions about how things would change if people were only fair or really valued you, but it is healthier to realize that "fairness" is very personal, so others tend to have a different point of view about what would be fairest for themselves.
- **fallacy of change:** Expecting that other people will change to suit you if you can just pressure them enough. The truth is, the only person you can really control or have much hope of changing is yourself, and pressuring other people only hurts the relationship.
- **global labeling:** Generalizing one or two qualities (in yourself or others) into a negative global judgment. Global labeling ignores all contrary evidence, creating a view of the world that can be stereotyped and one-dimensional. Labeling yourself can have a negative impact on your self-esteem, while labeling others can lead to snap-judgments, relationship problems, and prejudice.
- **being right:** Some people feel continually on trial to prove that their opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and you may go to any length to demonstrate this, even when it damages an honest and caring relationship.
- **heaven's reward fallacy:** Expecting all your sacrifice and self-denial to pay off, as if there were someone keeping score – and then feeling bitter when the reward doesn't come as expected. The problem is that while you are always doing the 'right thing,' if your heart really isn't in it, you are physically and emotionally depleting yourself... and essentially destroying the spiritual value of your service to others. After all, as the saying goes: "God loves a cheerful giver."

## GETTING OUT OF THINKING TRAPS

### 1. try to separate your thoughts from actual events.

Stop to ask yourself the following questions when something upsetting happens:

- ▶ **What is the situation:** What actually happened? Only include the “facts” of the situation that everyone would agree on.
- ▶ **What are your thoughts:** What are you telling yourself?
- ▶ **What are your emotions:** How do you feel?
- ▶ **What are your behaviors:** How are you reacting and what are you doing to cope?

**Don't try to get out of a thinking trap by just telling yourself to stop thinking that way.**

*That doesn't let you look at the evidence and challenge the thinking trap. When you try to push upsetting thoughts away, they are more likely to keep popping back into your mind.*

### 2. identify the 'thinking traps'

Take a look at the thoughts you've listed. Are you using any of the thinking traps and falling into distorted thinking patterns? It's common to fall into more than one thinking trap. Go back to the thinking trap list and identify which ones apply to you and your current situation.

### 3. challenge the thinking traps

The best way to break a thinking trap is to look at your thoughts like a scientist and consider the hard facts. Use the evidence you've collected to challenge your thinking traps. Here are some ways to do that:

- ▶ **Examine the evidence:** Try to find evidence against the thought. If you make a mistake at work, you might automatically think, “I can't do anything right! I must be a terrible employee!” When this thought comes up, you might challenge it by asking, “Is there any evidence to support this thought? Is there any evidence to disprove this thought?” You might quickly realize that your boss has complimented your work recently, which doesn't support the idea that you're a bad employee.
- ▶ **Double-standard:** Ask yourself, “Would I judge other people if they did the same thing? Am I being harder on myself than I am on other people?” This is a great method for challenging thinking traps that involve harsh self-criticism.
- ▶ **Survey Method:** Find out whether other people you trust agree with your thoughts. For example, you might have trouble with one of your kids and think, “Good parents wouldn't have this kind of problem.” To challenge this thought, you can ask other parents if they've ever have these kinds of problems with their kids.
- ▶ **Conduct an experiment:** Test your beliefs in person. For example, if you think you think that your friends don't care about you, call a few friends and make plans to get together. If you assumed that they will all say no, you may be pleasantly surprised to hear that they do want to see you.

*sources: these styles of thinking (a.k.a. cognitive distortions) were gleaned from the work of several authors, including Albert Ellis, Aaron Beck, and David Burns, among others. 2005/2006, Eastern Washington University*