

Break Free From Unhealthy Thinking Patterns

INTRODUCTION

Thoughts shape the way we feel, and feelings affect the way we react, what we go on to say and do, and how we live our lives.

A thinking pattern is an **habitual** way our minds process what happens to us and around us. Some of our thinking patterns are good and healthy, reflecting what is true. Some are not so good and may reflect significant distortions of truth which need to be challenged and replaced with the truth.

Unhealthy thinking patterns can generate negative emotions within ourselves and towards others, and add unnecessary pain and difficulty within relationships.

AN EXERCISE TO STRETCH YOUR MIND!

The following exercise will give you an opportunity to explore whether you are prone to any common unhealthy thinking patterns.

Read the following statements and tick those that ring true for you, that seem to describe how you commonly think and feel.

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| 1. I see things very much as black and white. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I tend to make mountains out of mole-hills. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I often take things personally. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Past disappointments lead me to have lower expectations for the future. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. What I am feeling is more compelling than what I'm told by others is true. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I often think people make too much of their problems. They should just get over things. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. There is a place for everything and everything in its place. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Many things seem to be a major issue to me. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. It's very important to me to know the approval of those I respect. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. I often feel things won't get any better. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. I can't really believe I'm loved unless I am told frequently. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. I can handle problems; I don't really need much support from anyone. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. I am a perfectionist - reaching the highest standard in what I undertake is essential to me. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14. I seem to over-react to relatively small irritations. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. If someone is upset I often imagine I am the reason. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 16. I tend to distance myself from people if they hurt or disappoint me. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 17. I am more affected by the WAY something is said than WHAT is actually said. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 18. There's no reason for people to get so worked up or emotional about things. | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Below, circle the numbers of those statements you ticked

Magnifying 2, 8, 14	Minimising 6, 12, 18	Personalising 3, 9, 15
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Emotional Reasoning 5, 11, 17	Generalising 4, 10, 16	Polarising 1, 7, 13
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Nearly everyone seems to fall victim to at least one of these six thinking patterns. The particular patterns we ought to pay attention to would be those with two or more numbers circled. According to this exercise, I have a tendency toward:

Not everyone can identify any of these patterns at work in themselves – hopefully as God works in us and our minds are renewed the patterns will recede and be replaced by more healthy patterns! However, you may recognise them from your past, or maybe see them at work in someone you know well. This exercise may help you to understand others better and give you tools to help them understand themselves better.

Share with one another

In small groups read the following outlines and discuss together the questions on page 4.

1. MAGNIFYING

- Making mountains out of mole-hills.

Description

Those who magnify have a tendency to exaggerate events until everything seems like a catastrophe. They may be volatile with anger, unmerciful with self-condemnation or overwhelmed with fear or self-pity. Others may view them as self-absorbed, pre-occupied with their own crises, whiny and over-reactive.

Background

The childhood home may have been an environment in which little things were blown out of proportion. Discipline may have been excessive and out of proportion to the offence. Spilled milk provoked a character attack. Perhaps a parent was pre-occupied with their own situation, experiencing loneliness, rejection, or fear, which contributed to them seeing catastrophes in every situation. A parent may inappropriately have looked to a child to take responsibility beyond their ability or maturity, resulting in the child feeling overwhelmed.

Possible indicators of magnifying

Frequent use of extreme words and phrases such as *never, every, devastated, worst, ruined, terrible, horrible, awful, too late, all, nothing*. This exaggerated thinking may produce self-condemnation or criticism of others.

Truth

Mole-hills are not mountains; not everything is a major event; a 50p event needs a 50p reaction. People sometimes treat us badly, but not always. We do get some things wrong, but not everything. It is usually too soon to give up.

Effect on relationships

It is hard to live in an atmosphere where every little event is made to feel like a catastrophe. When difficult events do arise there is little ability to cope. Emotional energy is sapped by trying to exist with "big" events.

Overcoming Magnifying

Be alert for the trigger words *always, every, no one, never, awful, worst, terrible, horrible*. Analyse what caused this sort of response and then take your thoughts captive, replace them with more rational truthful thinking.

e.g. Someone drives you to the station for a long journey; you miss your train and end up having to buy another ticket for a later train. A magnifier might feel anger, blame, depression: *'that's it, my whole day is ruined!'* A more truthful reaction might be: *'It IS a lot of money, but they didn't make me late on purpose; I will get there and it was kind of them to drive me'*

2. MINIMISING

- Feelings associated with significant life events or issues are denied

Description

People who minimise will often say 'It doesn't really matter'. When someone doesn't express or acknowledge their own emotions they tend not to expect others to have feelings either. Even during life's major events, little emotion is shown or expected of others.

Minimisers have trouble labelling or experiencing emotions other than anger. When pressed to communicate they give facts, opinions and reasons instead of vulnerably sharing their needs or feelings. They will deny that anything is wrong or that anything troubles them, 'No, I'm fine'. Much effort may be expended to "put a good face on things". Impatience can be shown towards those who more readily show emotion. They are able to compartmentalise very effectively.

Background

Minimisers may come from homes where personal needs were neglected or overlooked. To cope with pain they have learnt to "shut down" and act as if nothing is wrong. Such a person may have been encouraged to deny their own needs, which promotes losing touch with their own feelings. They may have become self-reliant or self-sufficient having seen this pattern modelled by those close to them.

Truth

Some of life's events are major happenings and are worth a significant emotional and/or behavioural response.

Effect on relationships

Minimisers often leave those close to them feeling lonely, frustrated and feeling hurt, particularly during tragic events when little or no feeling is demonstrated. They deny that anything troubles them and are also averse to acknowledging pain in others. They do not give space for others to express their feelings but encourage them that 'it's fine, don't worry'.

Overcoming Minimising

Reassurance may be needed that showing emotions is not the same as losing control, and help to recognise that showing emotion when painful feelings have been experienced is healthy. The thought that to show emotion is a sign of weakness can be taken captive and the more positive response of recognising and acknowledging feelings can be chosen.

3. PERSONALISING

- Life events are perceived as personal rejections and attacks.
- There is a "probably my fault" thought pattern.

Description

A personaliser tends to take responsibility for events involving other people, assuming they are to blame or have done something to upset someone else. This creates unnecessary stress when things that happen are seen as rejections or attacks. Someone who personalises can be moody and easily hurt, blaming himself or herself for everything. Others may describe them as fragile, overly sensitive or childish in their responses. They are often insecure, tend towards self-condemnation, and have a very active imagination.

Background

Personalisers often come from a highly critical or neglectful home environment where he/she was often wrongly blamed for whatever was happening. The child may have grown up with negative, questioning thoughts, 'What's wrong with me', 'what have I done wrong?'

Truth

We are not the target or cause of everything that happens to us. Usually what occurs has nothing to do with us, or is more a statement about the other person than about us.

Effect on relationships

When we take everything personally we run the risk of overreacting to those close to us and causing unnecessary tension in relationships.

Overcoming Personalising

Begin by taking notice of incidents when personalising has taken place. Strong feelings of anger, upset, hurt may lie beneath the self-blaming. Try and think of alternative reasons for the incident rather than taking responsibility for it yourself.

e.g. *Somebody fails to acknowledge or treat us as warmly as we might expect or hope. We go away having convinced ourselves that we have done or said something to upset them.*

A more truthful reaction might be; *'I wonder if she is alright - she didn't seem quite herself - I must call to see how she is.'*

4. EMOTIONAL REASONING

- Confusing feelings with facts.

Description

This thinking pattern reflects the statement that *'If I feel something it must be true'*. Someone who is an emotional reasoner puts feelings on the same level as facts. Feelings thoughts and facts are all confused and truth becomes distorted. A person may want love to be demonstrated in certain ways and when it is not might easily deduce 'you don't love me'.

Background

Growing up experiences are significant in producing this distorted thinking pattern. Living with a parent who modelled emotional reasoning makes it hard for a child to distinguish feelings from facts. Betrayal of one parent by another may have been witnessed. When broken promises are a frequent experience in childhood, an attitude which says, "I'll believe it when I see it" is prompted. Deep emotional trauma in childhood may have been experienced such as physical or sexual abuse. A child who frequently felt afraid but didn't receive any help dealing with their fears may grow into an adult who finds it hard to distinguish feelings from facts.

Truth

Even though I "feel it", it may not be true. Feelings are feelings, no more and no less. They are not facts. When I say "I feel that....", I'm really expressing important emotions such as hurt, fear, or anger.

Effect on relationships

Confusing feelings with facts can play havoc in relationships. Assumptions are quickly made based not on facts but on our fears and feelings. Relationships will be dominated by fear, anxiety and mistrust.

Overcoming "Emotional Reasoning"

Accept the truth that feelings have their place but they can't take the place of truth. Notice incidents when emotional reasoning has been allowed to take over.

Identify what you are feeling, what that is leading you to believe to be true, and alternative more rational possible reasons.

e.g. A mothers day card doesn't arrive leaving you feeling *'they didn't send one, they forgot because they are not bothered about me.'* A more truthful response may a more rational one: *'the post is awful these days; I imagine it will arrive tomorrow'*. Take wrong thoughts captive and think about true responses.

e.g. A wife who can't feel a husbands care about a hurtful experience may unreasonably accuse him of not caring. A more precise statement might be "I don't think you care" or "I'm afraid that you don't care." In this latter statement the real emotion - fear - is honestly expressed.

5. GENERALISING

- Past experiences become predictors of the future.

Description

Someone who generalises believes that past events will always predict the future. They tend to assume that whatever has happened before will unavoidably happen again. This is a deterministic view that doesn't discriminate sufficiently. It is a self-defeating thought pattern that prevents trust. It can feed a cynical pessimistic outlook. The belief is that nothing will, or even can change, including a person. There is a gloomy attitude towards the future. Such a thought process is associated with doubt, fear and insecurity. There is little initiative shown and other people are easily written off.

Background

Training in this thinking pattern often begins in the home environment where it was modelled by one or both parents in childhood. It may also result from past disappointments that have been painful and dealt with alone or not dealt with at all.

Truth

What has happened before does not have to happen again. Things can be different and even better, though it may require some effort for that change to take place.

Effect on relationships

Generalisers hold on to past hurts, failures, and rejections and use them as evidence for their gloomy attitude towards the future. e.g. One soured relationship with neighbours makes us unwilling to issue more invites. They can seep joy out of relationships.

Overcoming Generalising

Begin by recognising how often you are giving this message and pinpoint specific examples.

e.g. Replace *'I did really badly in my exams, I'll never get what I need to get toI'm not going to bother trying.'* with *'My marks were low, probably because I didn't work as hard as I could have done. I could try harder, retake and maybe I'll succeed.'*

e.g. a generaliser eats something not allowed on a new diet. Their reaction: *'dieting doesn't work.'*

Consequences of the reaction: they stop trying, become self-condemning, and may even eat more unhealthily.

A more truthful reaction might be: *'I am in control of my eating and I can choose what to eat or not'*.

With more truthful thinking response to one day of failure on a diet would be *'I'll begin again now'*.

6. POLARISING

- There is only one way to do something.
- Everything is right or wrong
- The world is seen in absolutes.

Description

Polarising is a perfectionist-thinking pattern that views life as all or nothing, good or bad, black or white. This can be difficult to live with because the tendency is to be judgmental and exacting. Polarisers judge theirs and others performance on the basis of their own impossible standards. When they don't attain their idea of perfection they are likely to suffer great frustration and despair. They tend to focus on what is wrong rather than what is right. Rigid rules are held for evaluating life. They can lack flexibility. Little satisfaction is felt in modest performance even though there has been genuine effort. Even when successful, little joy is expressed because success was expected anyway.

Background

Legalistic, critical or performance - orientated families can give rise to these perfectionist attitudes. In such homes a child may have had many insecurities and fears. Perhaps whatever a child did was never good enough, or success was expected. Perhaps others around them were consistently criticised and evaluated. Homes that were extremely unstructured might also contribute to the development of this tendency.

Truth

The process of achieving something, including effort and motivation also have value even when the end result is disappointing. Some issues are black or white but many are shades of grey. There are usually many ways of doing things and mine are not necessarily better than anyone else's – they are just what I believe to be right.

Effect on relationships

Polarisers may tend to define every issue very simplistically. They are easily discouraged and disillusioned. They can be rejecting and accusing of others with a tendency to attack, to become angry or resentful and withdraw. They can be convinced they are right, that they know best, and this can provoke a lot of conflict.

Overcoming Polarising

Middle ground may need to be defined for many issues and multiple options to solve a problem may need to be identified. Be aware of your reactions and analyse what prompted your response. e.g. One aspect of a project being worked on is criticised.

A polarising reaction says, *"This project is totally useless from start to finish"*.

Anger is felt towards the critic and personally.

If *'This project is totally useless'* is replaced with *'The project wasn't perfect but there was a lot of good in it. I can improve it'* then the response can be to evaluate the criticism, consider changes and to move on.

Discuss and share in small groups

1. Talk together about what you have recognised about yourself. One pattern may stand out or there may be parts of several at work in you. You may have recognised thinking patterns that a friend has that make relationships difficult.

2. Talk about some of the childhood experiences that may have contributed to these thinking patterns.

How did you observe these patterns in your own family?

What did you experience which may have prompted your faulty thinking patterns?

Do any of the possibilities described in the "Background" section for your thinking patterns "ring true"?

If memories begin to be identified and expressed, try and identify the feelings surfacing and give or receive comfort for any hurt or pain.

Breaking free - 2 things to encourage one another to do

1. Admitting to a friend or our marriage partner that we recognise a tendency to think in a certain way, and asking for support in overcoming the unhealthy reaction and seeing the truth, is an excellent start. It is very hard to correct alone. Discuss the most helpful ways you can show support to each other in overcoming unhealthy thinking.

ie. When I am magnifying - overreacting to something - I find it helpful if you remind me that all is not lost, of some of the good things that are going on.

2. Dispute faulty thinking and practise new responses. One of the most important steps in this process is to be aware of what is happening.

VERSES TO REMEMBER

2 Corinthians: 10:5 Take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ

Romans 12:2 Be transformed by the renewing of your mind

Colossians 3:10 You have clothed yourselves with a brand-new nature that is continually being renewed as you learn more and more about Christ, who created this new nature within you.

Ephesians 4: 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

1 Peter 5:7,8 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

Philippians 4:8 Think about what is true