

Recognising Unhelpful Thinking (1) – Unhelpful Thinking Styles

When we feel anxious or low we often start to notice:

- > Fears — that make us feel tense, anxious and stressed
- > Unhappy negative thoughts — that make us feel low and sad
- > Frustrated angry thoughts at ourselves, our situation and sometimes at others such as our friends and relatives.



We may have all sorts of unhelpful thoughts about how we feel, our current situation and our future outlook. The first step in changing unhelpful thinking is to start noticing how common it is in your own life.

Frustration, anger, distress, shame, guilt and feeling down are often linked to the following unhelpful patterns of thinking – the unhelpful thinking styles.

Unhelpful thinking style	Some typical examples	Tick if you do this
Bias against myself	I'm very self-critical	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I overlook my strengths	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I see myself as not coping	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I don't recognise my achievements	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I knew that would happen to me!	<input type="checkbox"/>
Putting a negative slant on things (Negative mental filter)	I see things through dark tinted glasses	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I see the glass as being half empty rather than half full	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Whatever I've done in the week it's never enough to give me a sense of achievement	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I tend to focus on the bad side of everyday situations	<input type="checkbox"/>
Having a gloomy view of the future (Make negative predictions)	I think that things will stay bad or get even worse	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I tend to predict that things will go wrong	<input type="checkbox"/>
	If one thing goes wrong I often predict that everything will go wrong	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I'm always looking for the next thing to fail	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jumping to the very worst conclusion (catastrophising)	I tend to predict that the very worst outcome will happen	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I often think that I will fail badly	<input type="checkbox"/>
Having a negative view about how others see me (Mind reading)	I mind-read what others think of me	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I often think that others don't like me/think badly of me without evidence	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unfairly taking responsibility for things	I think I should take the blame if things go wrong	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I feel guilty about things that are not really my fault	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I think I'm responsible for everyone else	<input type="checkbox"/>
Making extreme statements / rules	I use the words "always", "never" a lot to summarise things	<input type="checkbox"/>
	If one bad thing happens to me I often say "Just typical" because it seems this always happens	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I make myself a lot of "must", "should", "ought" or "got to" rules	<input type="checkbox"/>

Related leaflets include:
 > Recognising Unhelpful Thinking (2)
 > Changing Unhelpful Thinking (1), (2) and (3)



Recognising Unhelpful Thinking (1) – Unhelpful Thinking Styles

Contd.

All of these are examples of unhelpful or extreme thinking. Often we believe these thoughts and fail to question them just because they “feel” true. We may forget to check out how true these thoughts really are.

This doesn't mean that you think like this all the time or in every situation. In some situations your thoughts may be more positive, helpful and realistic. You can use your feelings as a marker – if you are feeling low or anxious then there are almost always depressed or anxious thoughts too, whereas if your mood lifts or you feel calmer, your thoughts will almost always be more positive, helpful and realistic.

How do these unhelpful styles of thinking affect us?

Such thoughts are common and usually when we have these sorts of thoughts we may feel a little upset, but then quickly dismiss the thought and carry on with our life, realising that the thought is not realistic.

However, there are times in life when we are more prone to these thoughts and find them harder to dismiss such as when we are stressed or depressed. It's at these times when such thoughts seem more believable and we don't think to question them. We may even tend to dwell on these thoughts because they fit in with our negative mood, making it even more difficult to dismiss them and get on with our life.

What we think can have a powerful impact on us. It affects how we feel and what we do.

The unhelpful thinking styles lead to:

- 1 Mood changes: you may become more down, guilty, upset, anxious, ashamed, stressed or angry.
- 2 Behaviour changes: by either reducing or stopping what we do, or causing us to avoid things that make us feel anxious. Finally, we may start to act in unhelpful ways that end up backfiring and worsen how

we feel. An example is drinking too much. Although we may think this helps, in the longer term it backfires and can become part of the problem.

The result is that these unhelpful thinking styles act to worsen how you feel. They are common and often occur automatically at times of stress. It is important to realise that negative unhelpful thoughts are often exaggerated or simply not true.

Mental pictures/images.

Another way that we think is often as a mental picture. Some people (although not everyone) notice mental pictures or images in their mind from time to time. Images are a form of thought and may be “still” images (like a photograph), or are moving (like a video). Images may be in black and white or be in colour. They may include predictions of the future, for example of something going badly wrong; or memories of past events, for example of previous significant problems often going right back to childhood; or things that are currently happening, for example images of how we think other people see us. Images can also show any of the unhelpful thinking styles shown above.

Your guide can help you to work out if any of these unhelpful thinking styles or images apply to you - if you are suffering from a low mood or anxiety then at least some of these thinking styles or images are probably going to be present. They may be hard to spot or pin down though, especially if they have been around for a long time and have become automatic, habitual thoughts. You may have never even questioned them. The most helpful thing to remember about thoughts is that they are just thoughts and not facts, however strongly you believe them to be true.

You might start by keeping a diary of your thoughts and images to bring back and discuss with your guide next time. Ask your guide for the ‘Daily Diary’ leaflet, or use your own diary if you prefer.