

Troubled by upsetting thoughts?



Dwelling on the negative?

Finding it hard to see things positively?

If you find yourself feeling this way, you are not alone. We all find ourselves coping with troubling thoughts from time to time—especially when going through positive or negative changes in our lives or when we feel depressed, anxious, sad, angry or stressed out.

Did you know that our thoughts have a big influence on our mental health?

That's because what we tell ourselves about a situation affects how we feel and what we do.

### What is healthy thinking?

Healthy thinking does NOT mean *positive* thinking! No one can look at things positively all the time. Sometimes bad things happen, like getting fired at work, having an argument with a friend, or losing someone you love. It's normal and healthy to feel upset and have negative thoughts when these things happen. Healthy thinking patterns means looking at the positive, the negative, and the neutral parts of a situation, and *then* making a conclusion about the situation. In other words, healthy thinking means looking at life and the world in a *balanced* way—not through rose-coloured glasses.



Sometimes how we interpret a situation can get a bit distorted and we only focus on the negative aspects—this is normal and expected. However when we interpret situations too negatively, we are bound to feel worse. We are also more likely to respond to the situation in ways that are unhelpful in the long term. Fortunately, there are specific coping strategies that are very helpful in managing difficult thoughts.



For more information about the connections between thoughts and other aspects of mental health, see our **Mental Health Matters** Wellness Module at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca).

Read on to learn more about your own patterns of thinking and useful tips for improving your mental health through healthy thinking strategies.



# What are common thinking traps?

Everyone falls into unbalanced thinking traps from time to time. We are most likely to distort our interpretation of things when we feel sad, angry, anxious, depressed or stressed. We are also more vulnerable to thinking traps when we are not taking good care of ourselves (e.g., not eating or sleeping well).

David D. Burns is an expert in thinking patterns and mood. In his book, *The Feeling Good Handbook*, he identifies several common thinking distortions. See if you can recognize your own thinking traps in the list below that is adapted from his book.

**Overgeneralizing:** Thinking that a negative situation is just one of a never-ending cycle of bad things that happen. People who overgeneralize use words like “always” or “never” in their thinking.

- **Example:** If it’s raining on the day you want to go for a bike ride, you might say: “Great! This *always* happens to me. Whenever I want to do something fun, something *always* happens to spoil it!”

**Black and White Thinking:** Seeing things as either right or wrong, good or bad, perfect or terrible. People who think in black and white terms see a small mistake as a total failure.

- **Example:** If you are trying to make healthy eating choices and you have one bite from a piece of cake, a black and white thought might be: “Well, my healthy eating plan is a complete failure. I might as well eat the whole cake now.”

**Labeling:** Saying something negative about yourself or other people.

- **Example:** If you make a mistake at work you might say to yourself “I’m a stupid idiot.” Maybe your teacher at school points out a mistake in a non-threatening way and you think “My teacher is a total jerk!”

**Mind Reading:** Jumping to conclusions about what others are thinking, without any evidence.

- **Example:** If someone you know passes you on the street without saying hello, a mind-

reading thought might be: “She’s so rude to deliberately ignore me. She must think she’s better than me.” In reality, she may not have even seen you.

**Fortune Telling:** Predicting that something bad will happen, without any evidence.

- **Example:** If you are going to a party, you think: “I know no one will talk to me at the party, and I’ll have a terrible time.” Maybe you are about to take a test or exam and you think: “I am going to fail.”

**Mental Filter:** Focusing on the negative in a situation, and ignoring the good.

- **Example:** If you went to a party and talked to five different people, but one person didn’t talk to you, you think: “There must be something wrong with me. That guy didn’t talk to me.” In this example, you are forgetting about all the people who *did* talk to you.

**Emotional Reasoning:** Thinking that bad feelings or emotions say something about how the situation actually is.

- **Example:** If you feel anxious every time you take a plane, you think: “If I feel scared, then this must be a sign it’s unsafe to fly.” In reality, feelings are often very different from the facts.

**‘Should’ Statements:** Telling yourself how you “should” or “must” act.

- **Example:** If you are having problems coping with a very difficult situation, you are too hard on yourself and think: “I should be able to handle this without getting upset and crying.”

**TIP:**

Don’t try to get out of a thinking trap by saying to yourself “stop thinking that way” or “don’t think such stupid things.” These are not true challenges that involve looking at the evidence. Research also shows that when we try and push away upsetting thoughts, they are more likely to keep popping back into our minds. This way of coping with troubling thoughts will only make you feel worse in the long run.

# 1 Try to separate your thoughts from actual events

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 behaviours:** How are you reacting and what are you doing to cope?

## How do I get out of a thinking trap?

Listed on this page are strategies to challenge common thinking traps. Many people find their mood and confidence to face difficult situations improve after working through these skills. We have created an online worksheet at [heretohelp.bc.ca](http://heretohelp.bc.ca) help you work through each step.

# 2 Identify the ‘thinking traps’

Take a look at the thoughts you have 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 on page 2 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. Take the hard facts you know to be true and use them to challenge any distortions that have developed in your thinking patterns. Here are some ways to do that,

**Examine the evidence:** Try to find evidence against the thought. For example, some of us will react to making a mistake at work with the thinking trap “I can’t do anything right and I’m a terrible employee.” We need to ask ourselves: “Is there any evidence against that thought? Perhaps my boss complimented other work I did. Maybe I’m a good employee at some things even if there are a few things I need more experience to master.” Other questions that will help you examine the evidence in a balanced way are included in our online worksheet.

**Double-standard:** Ask yourself: “Would I judge other people like this if they made the same mistake? 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 and respect agree with your thoughts. For example, you might be having trouble with one of your kids and think “good parents wouldn’t have this kind of problem.” Challenge this thought by asking other parents you respect whether they ever have any problems with their kids.

**Conduct an experiment:** Test your beliefs in person. For example, if a friend cancelled going out with you one night, you might think: “Nobody likes me enough to spend time with me.” This thinking trap can be tested by doing an experiment. Try to make some plans with two or three other friends or family members and see what happens. You might have predicted they would all say no, so it will be a pleasant surprise (and a good challenge!) if one of them agrees to get together sometime in the near future.

## Aim for balance in your thoughts

Once you have worked through some challenges, try to think of a more *balanced* thought to replace the old thinking traps. Let’s use the following example:

### Situation

My friend doesn’t say hello when I pass her on the street.

### Thoughts

She’s so rude. She doesn’t like me anymore.

### Thinking Trap

Labeling  
Mind Reading

### Challenge

Examine the evidence: She has never been rude to me in the past. I have no proof she even saw me.

### Balanced Thought

There could be lots of other reasons why she didn’t say hello. She probably didn’t see me and still likes me. I’ll wait until the next time we meet before I jump to any negative conclusions about our friendship.

## Are all negative thoughts unhealthy thinking traps?

The answer to this is **NO**—there are times when negative thoughts are realistic given a really bad situation. It can still be helpful to find different ways of looking at the situation. Try to find a meaningful personal challenge in the situation. See if you can find any opportunities for personal growth or developing new skills. Many people coping with difficult situations find their upsetting thoughts improve if they work on other coping skills such as identifying the main sources of stress in their lives, problem-solving things under their control, and getting some social support. For more information and practical strategies see [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca) for our range of resources on coping with stress.



If you are having regular, distressing, unwanted, and strange thoughts, this can be a sign of a mental health or substance use problem that may require treatment. Fortunately, help is available.

If you or someone you care about continue to experience upsetting or unusual thoughts that are difficult to manage alone, please visit your family doctor or a trained mental health professional to discuss your symptoms and helpful resources.

### Help With Healthy Thinking!

There are many workbooks and self-help manuals that can help you to challenge thinking traps and build up your healthy thinking skills. We have listed some examples for you below. Ask your public library to get copies if they are not yet available.

Healthy thinking is a key part of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT is an effective treatment approach for a number of substance use and mental health problems. Healthy thinking is a key self-management skill for individuals coping with mental illness or substance use problems. Consider working with a health professional trained in CBT if you need help in developing your healthy thinking skills.

Practice your healthy thinking skills with our online worksheet at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca/helpmewith/wellness8.shtml](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/helpmewith/wellness8.shtml)

### Additional Resources and Select Sources

- Bourne, E. J. (2000). *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* (Third edition). Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- Burns, D.D. (1999). *The Feeling Good Handbook*. New York: Plume.
- Burns, D.D. (1999). *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*. New York: Plume.
- Greenberger, D. & Padesky, C.A. (1995). *Mind Over Mood: Change How you Feel by Changing the Way you Think*. New York: Guilford.
- Kaiser Permanente website: *Healthy thinking*. Go to [members.kaiserpermanente.org](http://members.kaiserpermanente.org) and choose Mind/Body Health under the Featured Health Topics drop-down menu.