

## **TYPES OF THOUGHTS THAT CAN CAUSE PROBLEMS**

(Notes from reading: Coping with Anxiety by Edmund Bourne & Lorna Garano, 2003, New Harbinger Publications, Inc., Oakland, Ca)

1. **Catastrophizing**: Fearful thinking takes many forms, but anxiety sufferers are often intimately acquainted with catastrophizing. This is when you imagine that some disaster is about to happen. You predict dire consequences from unremarkable occurrences: a plane hits turbulence and you think the plane will crash, an unexplained bump means you have cancer, a downturn in the economy means you will lose your job and be out on the street. Like most anxious thoughts, they start with “what if. . .” What if I break a leg skiing, what if my son starts taking drugs, what if they see me panic and think I am crazy”.

Overestimation and Underestimation: Catastrophizing relies on an overestimation of odds of a bad outcome as well as an underestimation of your ability to cope with it should it befall you. What are the odds, really, that your fatigue is caused by cancer? What really is the likelihood that your son is taking drugs or that you’ll break your leg skiing? And suppose the worst did happen, would you really be unable to cope? Many of us know someone who’s overcome a bout with cancer or trouble with a child, Certainly, these experiences would be difficult and undesirable but what are the odds that you could not weather them.

Challenge Catastrophizing: The following three steps are essential for challenging catastrophic thoughts and undermining its power over you:

1. Identify the distorted thoughts.
2. Question their validity.
3. Replace them with more realistic thoughts

Example: How might someone catastrophize about public speaking. How could they challenge those thoughts?

2. **Filtering**: You focus on the negative details while ignoring all the positive aspects of a situation. A young teacher was praised for having a great class discussion and was asked by the principal to write the homework assignment more neatly. The teacher went home depressed thinking that the principal didn’t think he was a good teacher.

3. **Overgeneralization**: You reach a general conclusion based on a single incident of piece of evidence. You exaggerate the frequency of problems and use negative global labels. This pattern can lead to an increasingly restricted life. If you got sick on a train once, you decide never to take a train again.

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4. **Polarized Thinking**: Things are black or white, good or bad. You have to be perfect or you're a failure. There's no middle ground, no room for mistakes. A grandmother who spends a lot of her time with her grandchildren feels like a failure because one day when the kids were acting up she yelled at them.

5. **Mind Reading**: Without their saying so, you just "know" what people are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, you have certain knowledge of how people think and feel about you. I know they must be talking about me.

6. **Magnifying**: You exaggerate the degree or intensity of a problem. You turn up the volume on anything bad, making it loud, large and overwhelming. Minor suggestions become scathing criticism. Minor setbacks become cause for despair. Slight obstacles become overwhelming barriers. The flip side of magnifying is minimizing. When you minimize, you fail to appreciate the many strengths you have to solve a problem.

7. **Personalization**: You assume that everything people do or say is some kind of reaction to you. You also frequently compare yourself to others, trying to determine who is smarter, more competent, better looking and so on. Because of this, you view your own worth as dependent on how you measure up to others. You become worried about whether you measure up.

8. **Shoulds**: You have a list of ironclad rules about how you and other people should act. People who break the rules anger you and you feel guilty when you violate the rules. I should be the perfect friend, parent, teacher, student or spouse; I should know, understand and foresee everything. I should be nice and never display anger. I should never make mistakes. Your personal code of conduct is so demanding that it's impossible to live up to and you make yourself anxious just thinking about it. You also get angry at friends because they're not perfect either.

## **SOLUTIONS FOR THESE 7 DISTORTIONS**

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1. **Filtering**: Focus on the solution and not the problem. Focus on your strengths and possible resources. Is the glass half empty or half full?
2. **Polarized Thinking**: Stop making black or white judgments. Think in terms of percentages and doing pretty well at something even though you made a mistake.
3. **Overgeneralization**: Instead of exaggerating something, quantify it. Instead of saying, “we are buried in huge, massive, debt”, say, “We owe \$27000.”
4. **Mind Reading**: How do you know it’s true? What are the other possibilities? It is better not to make any inferences about other people’s internal thoughts, either believe what they tell or hold no belief until some conclusive evidence comes your way.
5. **Magnifying**: Stop using words like terrible, awful, disgusting or horrendous or phrases like, “I can’t stand it”, “It’s impossible”, “It’s unbearable”. You can stand it because, you probably already have. Say to yourself, “I can cope”, “It may be very difficult, but I can manage”.
6. **Personalization**: When you catch yourself comparing yourself to others, remind yourself that everyone has strong and weak points. By matching your weak points to other people’s corresponding strong points, you are just looking for ways to demoralize yourself. If you assume that the reactions of others are often about you, force yourself to check it out. Maybe the boss isn’t frowning because you’re late. Where’s the evidence?
7. **Shoulds**: Reexamine and question any personal rules or expectations that include the words should, ought, have to or must. Flexible rules and expectations don’t use these words because there are always exceptions and special circumstances. Think of at least 3 exceptions to your rule, and then imagine all the other exceptions you didn’t think of. Soften your rule by saying “I prefer”, instead of “I should”.

## **OTHER WAYS TO DISPUTE IRRATIONAL THOUGHTS**

1. What is the evidence? What evidence supports it and what evidence is against it?
2. Is there an alternative explanation?
3. Does this thought help me reach my goals?
4. What is the worst that could happen? Could I live through it? What is the best that could happen? What is the most realistic outcome?
5. What is the effect of my believing the automatic thought? What is the effect of changing my thinking?
6. What would you tell a friend if she were in the same situation?