

## Recognizing biases in thinking

An intelligent woman believes she is the most stupid human on earth. A capable man thinks his life has been a complete failure, and dismisses any attempts to point out his past successes. A new mother looks to the future and sees only catastrophe for herself and her young daughter – catastrophe that no one else sees. How do such ideas persist?

In this section we consider a variety of ways in which thinking can become biased. These biases have been identified by Aaron Beck, David Burns, and others. Place a checkmark beside the ones that seem to affect you. After the description of each bias is a reminder that you could repeat to yourself when you catch the bias in action in your own life.

### \_\_\_\_\_ **Filtering**

Every moment of every day we screen out most of the sights and sounds around us. We have to do this. There is too much information at any one time to understand all at once. The problem comes when you screen out all of the positive and neutral information and only pay attention to the negative things in your life. As a result, your life seems unrelentingly bleak and depressing.

Reminder: *I need to pay attention to the whole picture.*

### \_\_\_\_\_ **Disqualifying the Positive**

You reject all of the positives in your life by insisting that they “don't count” for some reason or other. In this way you can hold onto a negative belief about things no matter how many positives there may be. The supportive friend you have doesn't count because she's the only one. The accomplishment you made doesn't count because it came about by pure luck. The step you took the other day doesn't count because “anybody can do that.”

Reminder: *Positives count – no excuses.*

### \_\_\_\_\_ **Overgeneralization**

You make an absolute and general rule based on very little evidence. At work you don't know what Form 3A is, so you are *completely* incompetent. A friend expresses her displeasure with you, so *everyone* must hate you. You can't catch a ball, so you are a *disaster* at all sports. The emotional impact comes from the inaccurate conclusion you draw (everyone hates me) rather than from the situation itself (Sarah is displeased right now).

Reminder: *There are absolutely no absolutes.*

## \_\_\_\_\_ **The Mood-Congruent Memory Bias**

Depression can affect not only how well you remember, but *what* you remember. When you are depressed you will find it easiest to remember the times in your life when you have felt sad or discouraged. Times when you have felt happy and confident are harder to remember and may seem less real to you. Consequently, it is easy to overestimate how much of your life you have felt down or depressed, and you may feel that you have always been depressed “underneath.” This idea may be true, but it may also come from the shift in memory that commonly occurs during depression.

Reminder: *Look for the memories that don't fit the bad mood.*

## \_\_\_\_\_ **The Fortune-Teller Error**

You believe that you are capable of telling the future, and the future looks grim. You anticipate that things will always turn out badly and you feel convinced that your predictions are accurate. You've signed up for a course, but you are sure to fail it. You have met someone new, but he or she will dump you soon. One of the problems with fortune telling is that you can make the future you predict come true. If you are going to fail, why study? If your partner will dump you, why put a lot of effort into the relationship?

Reminder: *You don't own a crystal ball.*

## \_\_\_\_\_ **Catastrophizing**

You take a relatively small event (a quarrel, a bad haircut, missing your dental appointment) and imagine extreme and horrible consequences that could happen as a result. A mistake making a wedding toast will offend your family for generations. A missed meeting means you will lose your job. A criticism from your partner is the beginning of the end of the relationship. Once you have blown the problem up into something huge, you experience an emotional impact as though the entire thing had *really happened* (as though you really had lost your job, for example).

Reminder: *Deal with the event, not with imaginary consequences.*

## \_\_\_\_\_ **Labeling**

Labeling is a way to make a problem unsolvable by turning a temporary *event* into a permanent *characteristic*. When you make a mistake you *could* focus on the error and how to correct it. Instead, you attach a negative label to yourself: “*I'm a loser.*” It's not that you made a mistake, it's that you have a permanent personal characteristic that *causes* mistakes. This brings on helplessness. Some people do this with depression, saying to themselves “*I'm a depressive*” (the depression is an essential part of my identity) rather than “*I have depression right now*” (which may change in the future).

Reminder: *Focus on the event, not on the person.*

## \_\_\_\_\_ **Magnification and Minimization**

You exaggerate your own foul-ups and other people's achievements *"She has her degree – a genius! And I took the wrong bus the other day – what a moron."* At the same time, you minimize your own achievements and other people's foul-ups. *"I landed a good job but they must have been desperate to hire; she lost her job but it was probably politics."* This way you almost always come out looking inferior. The problem is that you use completely different standards for yourself than for anyone else – standards that make it difficult for you to feel good about yourself.

Reminder: *Use the same scale for everyone – yourself included.*

## \_\_\_\_\_ **All-or-Nothing Thinking**

With all-or-nothing thinking you see things as being either black or white, never as shades of gray. You are either fat or thin, on the diet or off the diet, smart enough or completely stupid, depressed or happy, competent or incompetent, and so on. The same can apply to others. A relationship can be either perfect or horrible; your brother is either considerate or completely self-centered.

Reminder: *Where are the shades of gray in this?*

## \_\_\_\_\_ **Mind Reading**

You don't have to ask what someone else is feeling or thinking, or why they did something. You know it by mind reading. *"He's just in it for the money."* *"She just said that because she feels sorry for me."* *"He secretly wants out of this relationship."* *"She thinks I'm stupid."* *"He's a bigot – I can tell by the way he looked at me."* While the interpretations you make are usually *possible*, other possibilities are often missed. Maybe he's in that business because he enjoys it. Maybe she said that because she respects you. Maybe he looked at you that way because you took the parking space he wanted.

Reminder: *Stay in your own head.*

## \_\_\_\_\_ **Emotional Reasoning**

You assume that your negative emotions reflect things the way they really are. *"I feel it so it must be true."* *"I'm afraid of getting more depressed, so I must be on the way to depression."* *"I feel hopeless, so there must be no hope."* But remember: Your emotions depend on what you *think* is going on, not on what's *really* going on. If you see the situation the wrong way (*"The boss's frown means she hates me"*) you will experience the wrong emotion (fear of being fired). Most people who use emotional reasoning only do it with unpleasant emotions. They never assume that when they feel happy everything must be fine.

Reminder: *Don't believe everything you feel.*

### Checkpoint: Catching your biases

Most people find that they use more than one of the biases. Which one seems to give you the *most* trouble?

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You probably don't use this bias *all* the time. Which situations are you *most* likely to distort in this way?

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Distortions work best when you're not aware that they are happening. The next time you find yourself in one of the situations you have described above, try to catch the distortion as it happens. Then remind yourself what to do instead (perhaps using the reminder provided). What would be a more reality-based way of thinking in one of the situations you have listed?

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Repeat this revised way of thinking over to yourself a number of times. It will probably feel quite artificial at first because you are not used to it. With time it will become more familiar and will begin to *feel* right.