Thinking distortions

Awfulizing/Catastrophizing: You exaggerate the importance of such things as your mistakes or someone else's achievement. You expect the very worst and tell yourself that things are extremely bad. "It was awful". "I can't stand it." You see the likelihood of some bad event happening as very high, and your ability to cope with this event to be very low.

Labelling and Mislabelling: This is an extreme form of generalization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: "I am a loser". When someone else's behaviour rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him or her "He's an idiot." Mislabelling describes an event with language that is highly coloured and emotionally loaded.

Personalization: You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event, or as the centre of attention. For example, you think, "I always bring bad luck," or "Everyone was looking at me," or "I made them uncomfortable". Remember that just as you are responsible for your own thoughts and feelings, so are others responsible for themselves. You can't make anyone think or feel anything.

"Should" statements: You try to motivate yourself with shoulds, musts and oughts. If you find yourself unable to do something, you then feel guilty and demoralised, for example, "I should be able to understand this the first time I read it." If you direct these should statements towards others you feel anger, resentment and frustration, for example, "They should know how I was feeling."

Jumping to conclusions: You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion. There are two ways of jumping to conclusions:

1. Mind Reading: You automatically assume that you know that someone is thinking negatively about you and you don't bother to check this out with them. "They thought I was boring...I could just tell."

2. The fortune teller error: You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already established fact. For example, you worry about a presentation you have to give and think, "I know I will make a fool of myself and they will all laugh."

"When I recognise my thinking distortions I get perspective on my thoughts" – Rachael

"It was quite liberating to realise that all the negative thoughts going through my head weren't necessarily the truth. I used to feel a bit stupid for thinking some things until I realised that most people think things like this from time to time. I now catch my friends using these distortions (and have to hold back from 'correcting them'). I find I might even be using several at once. The other day I hanging out with my friend and I felt like I didn't have anything interesting to add to the conversation. My friend looked really bored, and I assumed this was because I was being boring. I found out later that she was just really down (not bored), and I had been using mindreading (It thought I knew what she was going through), personalising (I thought her mood was all about me) and I was magnifying all the moments I had nothing to say."

See if you can catch yourself using these thinking patterns over the next few days.

Remember – everyone uses these thinking styles at times without realising it. This is your chance to catch yourself thinking in unhelpful and distorted ways so that you can see situations a little more clearly.

This ends module 1. Try out these techniques over the next couple of days and when you're ready, come back for module 2, where you'll learn to challenge these thoughts.

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