

Mind Traps

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Many feelings such as sadness, anxiety and anger are caused and kept alive by the conclusions that we make. Sometimes we make wrong conclusions over and over because we get stuck in mind traps that rob us of our ability to be logical. Here are a few of the thinking traps we can fall into.

All-Or-Nothing Thinking

Trap: You see things only in extremes. You don't see any middle ground. You conclude something or someone is an extreme such as good or bad, wonderful or horrible.

Example: "If I'm not a total success then I'm a horrible failure."

Escape: Recognize that things often exist in degrees. Rate the current situation on a scale of 1 to 10.

Catastrophizing

Trap: You think the very worst of a situation even when there are other possibilities. You overreact.

Example: "My heart is beating fast! I'm having a heart attack!"

Escape: Look at the real probabilities. Focus on evidence that the worst did not happen, that things might not be as bad as they seem.

Arbitrary Inference & Temporal Causality

Trap: Drawing a conclusion without having evidence to support it. Believing that if two things happen around the same time then one causes the other.

Example: "Nobody has phoned me in the past month. That means nobody cares."

Escape: Recognize the faulty logic. List other things that could have been the cause.

Overgeneralization

Trap: Believing that if something is true in one case, it's always true. Making a sweeping conclusion about things such as your ability, performance, or worth on the basis of a single incident.

Example: "I made a mistake on that project. I'm such a failure."

Escape: Look at the evidence or proof. Is there evidence that it is not true?

Mind Reading

Trap: You jump to a conclusion on the basis of what you assume someone else is thinking.

Example: "He's thinking that I'm an idiot."

Escape: Realize that the person may rather than must be thinking that way. Consider other interpretations of the situation. Ask the person.

Filtering or Selective Abstraction

Trap: Paying too much attention to one or more negative details instead of seeing the whole picture. Only looking for negatives such as failures, mistakes, weaknesses, dangers, etc.

Example: "Nobody has ever been nice to me."

Escape: Take time to remember your successes and recognize your abilities. Keeping a log or diary of these may help. Ask yourself if you are ignoring some aspects of the situation.

Self-References

Trap: You are convinced you are the centre of everyone's attention. They are especially looking at your mistakes.

Example: "That person just smiled. That means she is laughing at me."

Escape: Look for evidence that it is and is not true. Remind yourself you are not the centre of the universe.

Emotional Reasoning

Trap: You are sure something is true just because you feel it so strongly, even if there is evidence that it is not true. You feel it, therefore it must be true.

Example: "I felt hurt when he said that. That means he wanted to hurt me." "Because I feel afraid there must be danger." "Because I feel sad, everything is hopeless."

Escape: Acknowledge your feelings but ask yourself what thoughts are causing them. Consider evidence that it is and is not true.

Excessive Responsibility

Trap: Feeling guilty and responsible for misfortunes that are beyond your control. Relating outside events to yourself when there is no basis for such a connection.

Example: "If he gets angry it'll be all my fault."

Escape: Consider other possible causes. Remind yourself that just because you could have prevented something, this doesn't always mean it was your fault.

Adapted from: A. Beck et al. (1979, p. 261); J. Beck (1995, p. 119); Ubell (1984)