Finding and Challenging Your Thinking Errors

Thinking errors are distorted ways of thinking that can cause us to feel sad, angry, anxious, or upset. When we have these negative feelings, we tend to make more thinking errors. This becomes a vicious cycle, which can lead to depression and anxiety.

This tip sheet is designed to help you identify and challenge your thinking errors.

Whenever you are feeling down, look for thinking errors that may be causing you to feel bad. When you find thinking errors, try to challenge them. Find different ways of looking at a given situation. As you do this, your mood will improve and you will feel more confident.

Some common thinking errors and ways to challenge them:

- **Black and white thinking.** We see things as all wrong or all right, all bad or all good.
  - *Example:* You go on a vacation trip with your family. On the way you get stuck in traffic for an hour. You think, “My vacation is ruined.”
  - *The Challenge:* Try not to look at the extremes. If something is not perfect, that does not mean that it is a total disaster. Ask yourself: “Am I taking an extreme view?”

- **Jumping to conclusions.** We assume the worst outcome even if there is little or no evidence to support that belief.
  - *Example:* You’re planning to retire in a few months. You think, “I’ll be miserable when I stop working.”
  - *The Challenge:* Do not make assumptions. Ask yourself: “Is this the only possible outcome? What are other possible outcomes?”

(continued on next page)
• **Magnification/catastrophizing.** We blow things out of proportion or exaggerate negative events.
  - *Example:* Your boss asks you to correct a mistake you made. You think, “I’m going to lose this job.”
  - *The Challenge:* Keep things in perspective. Ask yourself: “Am I making this a bigger deal than it really is?”

• **Personalization.** We blame ourselves when things go wrong.
  - *Example:* You ask your friend to see a movie with you. Your friend says, “No, thanks.” You think, “I’m no fun to be around.”
  - *The Challenge:* Look for other explanations or reasons. Ask yourself: “Is this all about me? Am I solely to blame? Are there other causes?”

• **Overgeneralization.** We assume that if an unpleasant thing happens, it will always happen. We transfer a single negative outcome to all like events.
  - *Example:* After you argue with your son, you think, “It’s pointless to try to talk to him.”
  - *The Challenge:* Be specific. Ask yourself: “Is there a time when things turned out differently?”

**Tina’s Story**

Tina works in a busy office. One day she met her boss in the elevator and said, “Good morning.” Her boss didn’t reply. Tina thought, “My boss doesn’t like me,” and she felt upset.

Tina knows that she often feels bad after things like this happen. So she called her UPMC Health Plan health coach to try to sort it out.

With help, Tina learned that:

- When something upsetting happens, she often blames herself. This is the thinking error called personalization. Many of us do this.
- She can spot that error and think, “Is what happened all about me? Could there be other causes?” There are usually many other likely causes.
- She can replace her thinking error with new, more helpful thoughts. For example, “My boss might have been caught up in other thoughts and didn’t hear me.”

Now that she challenges her thinking errors, Tina feels much better about herself and her life.

Your UPMC Health Plan health coach has tools that will help you learn to challenge your thinking errors and feel better. Talk with your coach about which tool might be best for you.
Take Action

Use the attached worksheet, Challenge Your Thinking Errors, during the coming week.

- For three days:
  - In the first column, write down something that happened that upset you.
  - In the second column, write down some of your thoughts about what happened.
  - In the third column, write down any thinking errors you can spot from the list on the front page. Keep in mind that some thoughts contain more than one thinking error.
  - Skip the last two columns.
- For the rest of the week:
  - Fill in the first three columns as before.
  - In the fourth column, write down any questions you could ask yourself to challenge your thinking errors.
  - In the fifth column, write down any new, more helpful thoughts you have.
- Tina’s example is in the first row.
## Finding and Challenging Your Thinking Errors

**Challenge Your Thinking Errors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Happened That Upset You</th>
<th>Challenge Questions</th>
<th>Personalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When I said, “Good morning,” my boss didn’t reply.</td>
<td>Is this all about me?</td>
<td>Could there be other causes?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Thoughts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Thoughts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My boss doesn’t like me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>My boss might have been caught up in other thoughts and didn’t hear me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**New, More Helpful Thoughts**

<table>
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A healthier life is on the line for you!

UPMC HEALTH PLAN