

Spotting Thinking Traps

Recognise the patterns that make pressure feel worse than it is

Under pressure, the mind takes shortcuts. Some of them are useful. Others, often called thinking traps or cognitive distortions, make a situation feel more threatening, more personal or more permanent than it really is.

Almost everyone falls into them, particularly when tired, stressed or anxious. The aim is not to stop having these thoughts, but to notice them sooner and to question them before acting on them.

IF SOMEONE NEEDS HELP NOW

If there is an immediate risk to life, call **999**. Samaritans are available free, 24 hours a day, on **116 123**. In England, NHS 111 (option 2) connects to an urgent mental health service.

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Common traps, and how they sound at work

TRAP	WHAT HAPPENS	HOW IT SOUNDS AT WORK
All-or-nothing	Seeing things in two categories only, with no middle ground	"One mistake in that report and the whole thing is worthless."
Mental filter	Noticing only the negative and screening out the rest	"They praised the pitch, but my voice shook at the start, so it went badly."
Shoulds and musts	Turning preferences into rigid rules for yourself or others	"I must never miss a deadline." "I should be able to handle this."
Mind reading	Assuming you know what others think, usually something critical	"My manager thinks I'm not up to it."
Catastrophising	Jumping to the worst possible outcome	"If this goes wrong I'll lose the client and probably my job."
Fortune telling	Predicting things will go badly, and that you won't cope	"The review is going to be a disaster."
Labelling	Turning one action into a judgement about who you are	"I forgot to send it. I'm useless."
Overgeneralising	Treating one event as a never-ending pattern	"I always get the difficult clients. Nothing ever goes my way."

TRAP	WHAT HAPPENS	HOW IT SOUNDS AT WORK
Discounting the positive	Dismissing what went well as luck or not counting	"Anyone could have closed that deal."
Emotional reasoning	Treating a feeling as evidence of a fact	"I feel out of my depth, so I must be."
Personalising	Taking responsibility for things that were not only, or at all, yours	"The team missed the target because of me."
Blaming	Placing all responsibility on others, so nothing can change	"There's no point trying. Management makes it impossible."

Many of these overlap, and one thought can contain several. What they share is that they feel completely true in the moment and look less certain on paper.

02

Catch one of your own

SITUATION: WHAT HAPPENED?	THE THOUGHT	WHICH TRAP(S)?	A MORE BALANCED THOUGHT

Questions that help you find the balanced thought:

- What is the evidence for this thought, and against it?
- Is there another way of seeing this?
- What would I say to a colleague who was thinking this?
- Will this matter in a month? In a year?
- What is the most likely outcome, rather than the worst?

REMEMBER

A thought is something your mind produces, not a fact. Writing it down is often enough to loosen its grip.