



collaborative minds
PSYCHOTHERAPY
MELISSA PATON

Unhelpful Thinking Patterns

WITH MELISSA PATON



We all experience unhelpful thoughts from time to time, especially when we are feeling stressed, anxious, or low. These thinking patterns can become automatic and influence how we perceive ourselves, others, and the world around us. Recognising these patterns is the first step in challenging and changing them. Below are some common unhelpful thinking habits and strategies to manage them.

1. All-or-Nothing Thinking

Seeing things in extreme terms—something is either all good or all bad, a success or a failure. There is no middle ground.

Example: "If I don't do this perfectly, I'm a complete failure."

Alternative: Look for the shades of grey. Most things exist on a spectrum rather than in absolutes.

2. Catastrophising

Assuming the worst will happen and blowing things out of proportion.

Example: "If I make a mistake at work, I'll get fired and never find another job."

Alternative: Ask yourself, "What is the most realistic outcome? What would I say to a friend in this situation?"

3. Overgeneralisation

Making broad conclusions based on a single event or limited experience.

Example: "I failed once, so I will always fail."

Alternative: Remind yourself that one event does not define you. Look at the bigger picture.

4. Personalisation

Blaming yourself for things that aren't entirely your responsibility or assuming things are about you.

Example: "My friend seemed quiet today. I must have done something wrong."

Alternative: Consider other explanations—maybe they are having a bad day unrelated to you.

5. Mind Reading

Assuming you know what others are thinking, usually in a negative way, without any real evidence.

Example: "They didn't reply to my message. They must be angry with me."

Alternative: Check the facts. Ask if you're unsure instead of assuming.

6. Emotional Reasoning

Believing something must be true simply because you feel that way.

Example: "I feel useless, so I must be useless."

Alternative: Feelings are not facts. Look for evidence that supports or contradicts your belief.

7. Should and Must Statements

Setting unrealistic expectations for yourself and others, leading to feelings of guilt or frustration.

Example: "I must always be in control. I should never make mistakes."

Alternative: Reframe your thoughts with flexibility—"It would be nice if..." rather than "I must."

8. Discounting the Positive

Ignoring or dismissing achievements, compliments, or good experiences.

Example: "I only did well because it was easy."

Alternative: Acknowledge and celebrate successes, no matter how small.

9. Filtering

Focusing only on the negatives and ignoring the positives in a situation.

Example: "Nine people praised my work, but one gave criticism. It was a disaster."

Alternative: Make a balanced assessment—notice both positives and negatives.

10. Comparing & Despairing

Measuring yourself against others and always feeling like you fall short.

Example: "She's so successful; I'll never be as good as her."

Alternative: Focus on your own progress and strengths instead of comparing to others.

11. Fortune Telling

Predicting the future negatively as if you know what will happen.

Example: "I know I'll mess up that presentation."

Alternative: Remind yourself that you cannot predict the future and things may go better than you expect.

12. Labelling

Defining yourself or others based on one behaviour or event.

Example: "I made a mistake, so I'm a failure."

Alternative: Separate actions from identity. One mistake does not define you.

13. Perfectionism

Setting excessively high standards and being overly self-critical when they are not met.

Example: "If this isn't perfect, it's not good enough."

Alternative: Aim for progress over perfection and celebrate small achievements.

14. Control Thinking

Feeling like you have complete control over everything (leading to stress) or no control at all (leading to helplessness).

Example: "Everything is my responsibility" or "Nothing I do will make a difference."

Alternative: Recognise what is within your control and what is not, and focus on what you can change.

15. Fairness Expectations

Believing that the world is always fair and that good things happen to good people while bad things happen to bad people.

Example: "I worked hard, so I should automatically succeed."

Alternative: Accept that life is unpredictable and fairness is not always guaranteed.

16. Expectation of Change

Expecting others to change in order for you to be happy.

Example: "If they loved me, they would change."

Alternative: Focus on your own needs and boundaries rather than waiting for others to change.

How to Challenge Unhelpful Thinking

1. Identify the Thought: Notice when you are using an unhelpful thinking pattern.
2. Challenge It: Ask yourself—Is this thought 100% true? What is the evidence for and against it?
3. Reframe It: Replace it with a more balanced, realistic perspective.
4. Take Action: Respond with self-compassion and healthier behaviours.

Becoming aware of these thinking patterns is the first step toward change. Over time, you can train your mind to think in more balanced and constructive ways, leading to better emotional well-being.

Takeaway: The way we think affects the way we feel. By identifying and challenging unhelpful thinking patterns, we can develop a healthier mindset and improve our overall well-being.





Unhelpful Thinking Patterns Worksheet

This worksheet will help you identify unhelpful thinking patterns, challenge them, and reframe them into more balanced thoughts.

Step 1: Identify Your Unhelpful Thinking Pattern

Think about a recent situation where you felt anxious, stressed, or upset. Identify the thought you had at the time and match it to one of the unhelpful thinking patterns.

What was the situation?
What thought went through your mind?
Which unhelpful thinking pattern does this fit? (select one or more)



Step 2: Challenge the Thought

Now, let's challenge the thought by asking yourself these questions:

What evidence supports this thought?

What evidence contradicts this thought?

What would I say to a friend if they had this thought?

Is there another way to look at this situation?



Step 3: Reframe the Thought

Write down a more balanced and realistic way of thinking about the situation.

A more helpful way to think about this is:

How does this new thought make you feel?

Step 4: Action Plan

What action can you take to reinforce this new way of thinking?

Reflection: Over time, practising this process will help you replace unhelpful thoughts with more constructive ones, improving your emotional well-being.

Tip: Keep a journal of your unhelpful thoughts and how you challenge them. The more you practice, the easier it will become to reframe negative thinking!



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