

St. Helier & Sutton CFS Service

EVALUATE YOUR UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

Once you have become aware of unhelpful thoughts, the next step is to examine them more closely to look for thinking errors.

What are thinking errors?

These can be described as unhelpful thinking patterns that seem plausible but often involve distortions of reality.

Why do I need to identify unhelpful thinking patterns?

Identify unhelpful thinking patterns will help you to stand back and dissect the thought, bringing you one step closer to coming up with helpful alternatives. You may notice that you have a tendency towards one more of the unhelpful thinking patterns listed below, or on the next page. Some of the thinking errors are very similar to each other.

UNHELPFUL PATTERNS OF THINKING

Unhelpful thinking pattern (Thinking error / distortion)	Description	Example
All or nothing thinking, also called black and white thinking	Looking at a situation with only 2 categories, instead of on a continuum	“If I can’t stay out until late, then there is no point in going out at all
Over generalisation	Making a negative assumption that because something has happened once, it will naturally happen again.	“I felt much worse when I increased my exercise before, so I am bound to feel the same when I increase my exercise next time”.
Eliminating the positive	Dwelling on bad experiences, and discounting positive aspects.	“I have had a terrible week and I have achieved nothing ”.
‘Should’ and ‘must’ statements	Fixed expectations of how you think yourself or others should behave. You may overestimate how bad it is if these expectations are not met	“I should be able to cope better by now; I’m not trying hard enough”. “I must make more of an effort in future”.
Catastrophizing	Getting things out of proportion, so that they appear worse than they really are.	“My muscles ache and I feel more tired today, I must be doing some permanent damage to myself”
Emotional reasoning	Taking a feeling as being evidence of fact. You ‘feel’ (believe) it so strongly and discount evidence to the contrary	“I feel a real failure; I am no better now than I was a few months ago

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Labelling	Putting a 'fixed' or 'global' label on yourself or others without considering evidence that doesn't support it.	"I'm incompetent". "My colleagues are totally insensitive".
Mental filter	Paying undue attention to one negative detail instead of seeing the whole picture	"One or two of my exam marks were dreadful, (even though others were good); I don't deserve to pass my degree".
Mind reading	Believing that you know what others are thinking, without considering other more likely possibilities	" They think that just because I don't look ill, that I am not ill "
Personalisation	Believing that others are behaving in a certain (negative) way because of you	"My doctor was irritable because I went to see him for two weeks running"
Tunnel vision	Seeing only the negative aspects of a situation	I feel just as tired as I did 3 months ago, there has been no improvement in my illness

If you would further information on challenging unhelpful thoughts there is a helpful chapter in **Overcoming Chronic Fatigue: A Self-help Guide Using Cognitive-Behavioural Techniques by Mary Burgess with Trudie Chalder** (Chapter8: Overcoming unhelpful thinking patterns pp 86-127).

**QUESTIONS TO HELP FIND EVIDENCE THAT DOES NOT SUPPORT
YOUR UNHELPFUL THOUGHT**

- Have I had any experiences that show that this thought is not completely true at all time?
- If my best friend or someone I loved had this thought, what would I tell them?
- If my best friend or someone who loves me knew I was thinking this thought, what would they say to me? What evidence would they point out to me that would suggest that my thoughts were not 100% true?
- When I am not feeling this way, do I think about this type of situation any differently? How?
- When I have felt this way in the past, what did I think about that helped me feel better?
- Have I been in this type of situation before? What happened? Is there anything different between this situation and previous ones? What have I learned from prior experiences that could help me now?
- Are there any small things that contradict my thoughts that I might be discounting as not important?
- Five years from now, if I look back at this situation, will I look at it any differently? Will I focus on any different part of my experience?
- Are there any strengths or positives in me or the situation that I am ignoring?
- Am I jumping to any conclusions that are not completely justified by the evidence?
- Am I blaming myself for something over which I do not have complete control?