Shy No Longer

Module 6

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

When a person experiences an unhelpful emotion (eg, depression or anxiety), it is usually preceded by a number of unhelpful self-statements and thoughts. Often there is a pattern to such thoughts and we call these, "unhelpful thinking styles". One of the things we have noticed is that people use unhelpful thinking styles as an automatic habit. It is something that happens out of our awareness. However, when a person consistently and constantly uses some of these styles of thinking, they can often cause themselves a great deal of emotional distress.

We are now going to describe a range of unhelpful thinking styles. A summary of all the styles are provided on this page, with further details on each style provided on subsequent pages. It might be a little too much to read everything at once, so perhaps you might want to read through this page and then choose one or two to read in detail. Can you identify any thinking patterns and styles that you often use?

Mental Filter
This thinking styles involves a "filtering in" and "filtering out" process – a sort of "tunnel vision," focusing on only one part of a situation and ignoring the rest. Usually this means looking at the negative parts of a situation and forgetting the positive parts, and the whole picture is coloured by what may be a single negative detail.

Jumping to Conclusions
We jump to conclusions when we assume that we know what someone else is thinking (mind reading) and when we make predictions about what is going to happen in the future (predictive thinking).

Personalisation
This involves blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong or could go wrong, even when you may only be partly responsible or not responsible at all. You might be taking 100% responsibility for the occurrence of external events.

Catastrophising
Catastrophising occurs when we "blow things out of proportion"., and we view the situation as terrible, awful, dreadful, and horrible, even though the reality is that the problem itself is quite small.

Black & White Thinking
This thinking style involves seeing only one extreme or the other. You are either wrong or right, good or bad and so on. There are no in-betweens or shades of gray.

Shoulding and Musting
Sometimes by saying "I should…" or "I must…" you can put unreasonable demands or pressure on yourself and others. Although these statements are not always unhelpful (eg "I should not get drunk and drive home"), they can sometimes create unrealistic expectations.

Overgeneralisation
When we overgeneralise, we take one instance in the past or present, and impose it on all current or future situations. If we say "You always…" or "Everyone…", or "I never…" then we are probably overgeneralising.

Labelling
We label ourselves and others when we make global statements based on behaviour in specific situations. We might use this label even though there are many more examples that aren't consistent with that label.

Emotional Reasoning
This thinking style involves basing your view of situations or yourself on the way you are feeling. For example, the only evidence that something bad is going to happen is that you feel like something bad is going to happen.

Magnification and Minimisation
In this thinking style, you magnify the positive attributes of other people and minimise your own positive attributes. It's as though you're explaining away your own positive characteristics or achievements as though they're not important

Note: Some of these styles might sound similar to one another. They are not meant to be distinct categories but to help you see if there is a kind of pattern to your thoughts. Just choose a few that might be most relevant to you.

Unhelpful Thinking Styles: More Details

1. Mental Filter (Selective Abstraction)

This is a "filtering in" and "filtering out" process. You can think of a mental filter as a sort of "tunnel vision" - focusing on only one part of a situation and ignoring the rest. Usually this means looking at the negative parts of a situation and forgetting the positive parts.

Here is an example:
Maybe you are out with your partner having a romantic dinner, and at the end of dinner you have a disagreement about whether to leave a tip or not. Perhaps you stew on this disagreement in the car all the way home. What do you think the effect of this thinking style will have on the way you feel?

Notice that in this example you are dwelling on a single detail out of the many details that occurred during the entire night. Notice that the detail you are dwelling on happens to be negative. You have excluded other details of the whole picture, which means that you are not remembering all the other positive experiences of the night. If you focus on this negative bit, then it is likely that you'll keep experiencing the negative feelings that go along with it.

This process also happens with the way we remember things. All the memories of our life experiences are stored in our brains. Have you ever thought of what would happen if we remembered everything all at once? We'd be pretty overwhelmed! It is natural that mental filtering occurs when we try to remember things. However, research has shown that when a person is depressed, they often remember events that are associated with negative unhelpful feelings. If they keep dwelling on these memories, how do you think they would feel?

Can you think of a situation where you used this thinking style?	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?

2. Jumping to Conclusions

Most of us would have heard the phrase "You're jumping to conclusions!" meaning that a conclusion is being made without really knowing if there is any evidence to support it. Although we might like to think that if we "have a hunch" about something it is usually right, there are times when we are not right. There are times that we keep jumping to the wrong conclusion, or the conclusions are usually negative. When we do this consistently then we can cause ourselves quite a bit of distress. There are two ways in which we often jump to conclusions – mind reading and predictive thinking.

Mind reading

As the name suggests, this is where we jump to conclusions because we assume that we know what someone else is thinking, or we know the rationale behind someone else's behaviours. This happens to be a very common style of thinking.

Have you ever had this experience? You are talking to someone, and during the conversation they look at their watch? Perhaps you've thought, "They must think I'm a really boring person", or "they don't want to be here with me." If you jumped to these conclusions without looking closely at all the evidence, such as the fact that the person is expecting an important phone call soon, do you think you'd end up feeling happy or distressed? Let's try another example: Your boss asks to see you. You instantly assume you know why she wants the meeting, "She's going to tell me that I'm not good enough for this job" or , "she's upset with the way I am doing things." If you believed your interpretation, which has been based on your mind reading, would you be happy or anxious?

Often these conclusions are a reflection of how we think about ourselves, eg, "I think I'm boring", "I think I'm not good enough", "I always do things wrong". Often we jump to the conclusion that because we think poorly of ourselves, then others must too.

Can you think of a situation where you used this thinking style?	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?

Predictive thinking

We can also jump to conclusions when we begin making predictions about what is going to happen on some future occasion. This is a very common way to increase anxiety and stress. These are often predictions where you overestimate the negative emotions or experiences you are going to encounter. Think through this example with us. Someone has asked you to give a talk to a group of people, you might think "I'm going to get in there and forget what I'm supposed to say, stumble over my words, and completely stuff up the presentation, and this will be terrible". You believe this despite the fact that you have delivered many successful presentations in the past. How might you feel if you believe this overprediction?

Can you think of a situation where you used this thinking style?	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?

3. Personalisation

Can you think of some occasions when something hasn't gone quite as you wanted, or the way you expected, and you've blamed yourself totally for what's happened? The toast burns at breakfast, and you blame yourself not the toaster, your child plays a wrong note at a concert, and you blame yourself for not making him practice harder. Without realising it, you relate external negative events to something you have or have not done.

When you personalise something, you take total responsibility for external events occurring, and ignoring other important factors. As a consequence you end up blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong or that could go wrong - even when you may only be partly responsible, or not responsible at all. If you were to consistently say to yourself, "This is my fault", "I'm to blame" – how do you think you'd start to feel? Carrying 100% of the responsibility is a rather large burden to bear, and one that's likely to leave you feeling discouraged or overwhelmed.

Can you think of a situation where you used this thinking style?	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?

4. Catastrophising

When someone says "you're blowing things out of proportion", or "you're making a mountain out of a molehill", chances are the person is catastrophising. This style of automatic thinking often begins with the following phrases; "What if !!!" or "Oh no …"

Let's try some examples.
"Oh my God I have a chest pain …… I might be having a heart attack"
"What if I disagree with my partner on this ….. I will lose an important relationship"
I felt depressed this morning, "What if I stay depressed?"

All of these examples get at the essence of this unhelpful thinking style – that the person views the situation as terrible, awful, dreadful and horrible. Notice the appearance of other unhelpful thinking styles – a bit of predictive thinking and a bit of jumping to conclusions.

Let's look at this final example. Have you ever submitted a project, perhaps at work, and then realised that you'd made a small error? You might think "I can't believe I made that mistake. This is going to be a poor submission, I'm going to lose the account and probably lose my job. I'll probably never find work in this city again!" What do you think it would be like for someone with this style of thinking? Even though the reality is that the problem itself is quite small, when we catastrophise, things can get very big very quickly, and we can work ourselves up to a point where it all seems beyond our control.

Can you think of a situation where you used this thinking style?	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?

5. Black & White Thinking

When it comes to sports, you may have heard some people say "There are no second places, there is only one winner and the rest are losers" as if being the second best in the world is nothing to be proud of. Or think of the student who doesn't get straight A's, and thinks that they are a failure. Perhaps you've said something similar to yourself, "If my partner and I don't always agree, then we have a bad relationship", or "If I'm not the best at what I do, then I'm worthless".

We call this all-or-nothing thinking, or black-and-white thinking because you will tend to see only one extreme or the other. With this thinking, you are right or wrong, you are good or bad - there are no in-betweens, no shades of grey, and no middle ground.

Can you think of a situation where you used this thinking style?	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?

6. 'Shoulding' and 'Musting'

It is quite common in everyday language to hear people use "I should", and "I must" statements. It is not necessarily unhelpful to think, "I should get my work in on time", it only becomes unhelpful when you use "should" and "must" statements to put unreasonable demands or pressure on yourself.

We might say "I should always get things right", or "I must never get upset with my partner", or "I should always cook exquisite meals." How do you think someone would feel after making these kinds of statements over and over again? Chances are, they'll feel guilty or disappointed in themselves.

We may also use these types of statements when we are talking about other people "She should know better than that", "People should always keep their promises", "People shouldn't get angry at others". You might have guessed that these kinds of statements leave us feeling frustrated or angry and disappointed in others.

Can you think of a situation where you used this thinking style?	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?

7. Overgeneralisation

The key element in this unhelpful thinking style is to take one instance in the here and now, and to impose this on all future situations.

Perhaps you've said to yourself in the past "This is just so typical!" telling yourself that this is "how things always are", or "everyone's like that", or "things never turn out well for me", when, in fact, there are only a few examples to go by. Making broad, generalised and global conclusions on the basis of only a little evidence can leave us thinking that things are really uncontrollable, inevitable and out of our hands. A sense of helplessness often accompanies such overgeneralisations. If you think about personal relationships, you might notice a few overgeneralisations. Have you ever said, or heard, something like, "You never do anything romantic for me", or "I always have to take out the garbage", or "Everyone keeps having a go at me", or "Every night I come home, those kids have always left a mess!"

Notice that these unhelpful thinking styles often include words like, "all", "never", "always" and "every", when, in most cases, the "always" and "never" are not as solid as we might think they are. How do you think people would feel if they used this thinking style? They may feel frustrated, discouraged, depressed, or annoyed, amongst other things.

Can you think of a situation where you used this thinking style?	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?

8. Labelling

You can probably think of times when you've bumped something off the table, or dropped a glass while washing the dishes and perhaps thought to yourself, "I'm such an idiot!" Or perhaps a friend doesn't call you to say they can't make it to your birthday party and you think, "They are so inconsiderate". It's a little like overgeneralising about people. When we make global statements about ourselves or other people, which are based on behaviour in specific situations, then we are labelling. The problem is, that by defining a person by one specific behaviour - and - usually one that we consider negative, we ignore the other positive characteristics and actions. When you step back from the situation and take a closer look, you might realise that breaking a glass doesn't mean that you're an "idiot", and the fact that you are competent in your job, or can communicate effectively with your family, might suggest otherwise. Similarly, your friend may have acted kind and considerate at other times, but something may have prevented them from calling.

Can you think of a situation where you used this thinking style?	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?

9. Emotional Reasoning

This is a style of unhelpful thinking where you base your view of situations, yourself, or others on the way you are feeling. Have you ever felt anxious about something and thought to yourself, "I know this isn't going to work out well" and everything turned out just fine? If you have, it's likely that you were using emotional reasoning. In this case, we tend to take our emotions as being evidence for the truth. For example, you might be walking down the street and think "I feel anxious, I know something dangerous is going to happen", or "I feel so depressed, this must be the worst place to work in". It's like we're saying to ourselves "I feel, therefore it is" - rather than looking at what real evidence there may be. There might be no other evidence to suggest that something dangerous might happen, or that it is the worst place to work in. The only evidence you have is how you feel.

Can you think of a situation where you used this thinking style?	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?

10.   Magnification and Minimisation

This is the binocular effect on thinking. Often it means that you enlarge (magnify) the positive attributes of other people and shrink (minimise) your own attributes, just like looking at the world through either end of the same pair of binoculars. Disqualifying your own attributes for achievement has negative effects.

Think of the times in your own life where you might have said, or heard others say, "Oh, that doesn't count, I was just lucky", or "They don't really mean it, they were just being polite". In this way you might water down positive experiences, and even transform them into negative ones. It's as though you're being so humble you're putting yourself down.

Can you think of a situation where you used this thinking style?	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?

Turtle Tip

Don't be hard on yourself if you find that your thinking reflects one or more of these styles. Being able to recognise it is the first step towards changing it.

Module Summary

- Often, there is a trend or a pattern to negative and unhelpful thoughts and this can be considered as unhelpful thinking styles

- These thinking styles are unhelpful because they often focus on the negative or inaccurate part of reality

- The following are summary descriptions of the 10 Unhelpful Thinking Styles contained in this module:

    1. **Mental Filter**: A "filtering in" and "filtering out" process. A sort of "tunnel vision," focusing on only one part of a situation and ignoring the rest. Usually this means looking at the negative parts of a situation and forgetting the positive parts – not seeing the whole picture.

    2. **Jumping to Conclusions**: Assuming that we know what someone else is thinking (mind reading) and making predictions about what is going to happen in the future (predictive thinking).

    3. **Personalisation**: Blaming yourself; taking 100% responsibility for the occurrence of external events.

    4. **Catastrophising**: Blowing things out of proportion.

    5. **Black & White Thinking**: Seeing only one extreme or the other – no in-betweens or shades of gray.

    6. **Shoulding and Musting**: Making unreasonable demands or pressure on self or others.

    7. **Overgeneralisation**: Taking one instance in the past or present, and imposing it on all current or future situations.

    8. **Labelling**: Making global statements about ourselves or others based on behaviour in specific situations.

    9. **Emotional Reasoning**: Basing your view of situations or yourself on the way you are feeling.

    10. **Magnification and Minimisation**: Magnifying the positive attributes of other people and minimising your own attributes.

In the next module we will look at how you can challenge your unhelpful thoughts and thinking styles.

Coming up