

UNTANGLE YOUR THINKING

METHODS to UNTANGLE THINKING

1. Define the distortion:

- A. **All or Nothing / Black and White / Polarized Thinking:** you think you're good or bad, smart or dumb, a winner or a loser. You need to see 'shades of gray' or 'the middle ground'. No one is 100% successful in everything. Everyone has assets and limitations. 
- B. **Overgeneralization:** Because something seems negative, you assume everything will always go wrong. You got a failing grade and decide you'll never graduate. Someone breaks up with you and you decide you'll never have a satisfying relationship.
- C. **Filtering:** You focus on the rubbish (like coffee grounds) and ignore the positives (the flavorful brew). You get 2-A's, 2-B's and a D. Instead of praising yourself for the A's and B's, you torture yourself over the D.
- D. **Jumping to Conclusions:** You immediately assume the worst. You think you can read minds. People are whispering or laughing and you know it's about you. You think you're a fortuneteller. "I'll never get promoted."
- E. **Catastrophizing or Magnifying or Minimizing:** You decide a small setback is a major catastrophe. You were reprimanded at work and are sure you'll be fired. You magnify your faults or the potential pitfalls of a situation and minimize your assets/achievements. You magnify others' attributes and ignore your own.
- F. **Emotional Reasoning:** You allow feelings to guide your thoughts. You are depressed and decide life is hopeless. If your moods are governed by a chemical imbalance they are unpredictable and inaccurate.
- G. **Shoulds – Also known as 'Musts', 'Oughts', 'Shouldn't's':** You pressure or chastise yourself and others. Who has authority to dictate someone's behavior? You set yourself up for failure or anger. Don't 'should' on yourself or others.
- H. **Labeling:** You call yourself and/or others names like 'incompetent', 'ignorant', 'crazy' or 'lazy'. Labels stick in your mind and cause you to give up on yourself, others, relationships and/or situations.
- I. **Personalization:** You take something personally that is marginally relevant to you. You're late to work two times. When a memo is distributed about tardiness, you believe it's meant for you alone (forgetting that numerous co-workers come late).
- J. **Blaming:** You blame others for your joy or unhappiness. "If only he'd ask me out I'd be happy", "It's all her fault I'm in a bad mood". What others say or do affects you only with your permission. Happiness is an 'inside job' contingent on your view of self and circumstances.

2. Thought Substitution - With a positive but realistic thought:

Replace "I'm stupid" with "I'm knowledgeable about some things but need to learn more about others."
Replace "I'm ugly" with "I have some attractive features such as... (hair, eyes, etc.)."

3. Do a Reality Check:

Ask yourself and others the true facts. Using pencil and paper, make lists if necessary. If you lost a job or relationship, list the number of jobs and/or relationship you have had. Look at the quality of whatever you lost (perhaps it's a blessing it's gone). Look at pros and cons of current situation and new opportunities. Decide it's not really the end of the world.

4. Talk to Yourself with Compassion:

Be gentle with yourself. Note your positive steps and reward your risk-taking. Perhaps you got a D or F but at least you took the class. You weren't selected for a job but you learned more about applications and interviews for the next time. Give yourself a 'pep talk'.

5. Shades of Gray:

See yourself, others and situations on a continuum. You're neither perfect nor worthless. Most people aren't 100% friend or foe. Situations aren't necessarily terrific or terrible. Decide you're a human being who usually succeeds but sometimes makes mistakes. Realize your friend is loyal 90% of the time. Your job is mostly pleasant with some annoying aspects.

6. Substitute Terms:

Avoid emotionally laden words such as 'devastating', 'horrible', 'heartbroken'. Use 'disappointing', 'unfortunate', 'hurtful' to put things in perspective.

7. Worst Case Scenario:

Consider (but don't dwell on) the worst possible outcome. Decide how you'll survive – the thoughts and/or actions you'll take to accept and overcome the situation. If you lose a job or relationship, what changes will you make to get and keep a more appropriate one?

To learn more about cognitive changes, consult *Ten Days to Self-Esteem* by David D. Burns, MD, © 1993, William Morrow and Company Inc.