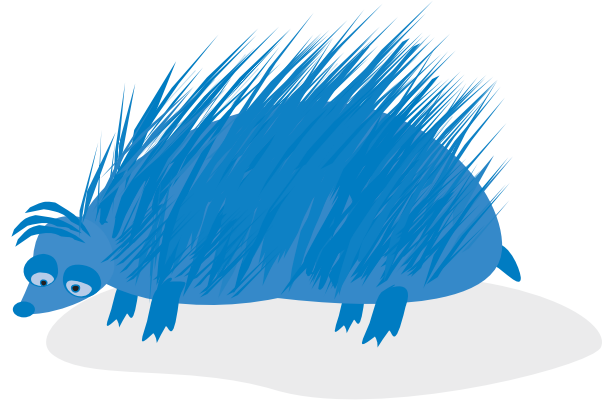**heretohelp**

troubled by upseting thoughts?

dwelling on the negative?

finding it hard to see things positively?

If you feel this way, you are not alone

We all find ourselves coping with troubling thoughts from time to time—especially when we're going through changes in our lives or when we feel depressed, anxious, sad, angry or stressed out.

What is healthy thinking?

Healthy thinking does NOT mean positive thinking! No one can look at things positively all the time. Sometimes bad things happen, like getting fired at work, having an argument with a friend or losing someone you love. It's normal and healthy to feel upset and have negative thoughts when these things happen. Healthy thinking means looking at the entire situation—the positive, the negative and the neutral parts—and then coming to a conclusion. In other words, healthy thinking means looking at life and the world in a balanced way, not through rose-coloured glasses.

Did you know that your thoughts have a big influence on your mental health?

That's because what you tell yourself about a situation affects how you feel and what you do. Sometimes your interpretation of a situation can get distorted and you only focus on the negative aspects—this is normal and expected. However, when you interpret situations too negatively, you might feel worse. You're also more likely to respond to the situation in ways that are unhelpful in the long term. Fortunately, there are specific coping strategies to help manage difficult thoughts.

Read on to learn more about improving your mental health through healthy thinking strategies.

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Canadian Mental Health Association
British Columbia
Mental health for all

AnxietyBC®

what are common thinking traps?

Everyone falls into unbalanced thinking traps from time to time. You're most likely to distort your interpretation of things when you feel sad, angry, anxious, depressed or stressed. You're also more vulnerable to thinking traps when you're not taking good care of yourself, like when you're not eating or sleeping well. See if you can recognize your own thinking traps in the list below:

thinking trap	example
Overgeneralizing Thinking that a negative situation is part of a constant cycle of bad things that happen. People who overgeneralize often use words like "always" or "never."	I wanted to go to the beach, but now it's raining. This always happens to me! I never get to do fun things!
Black and White Thinking Seeing things as only right or wrong, good or bad, perfect or terrible. People who think in black and white terms see a small mistake as a total failure.	I wanted to eat healthier, but I just had a piece of cake. This plan is a total failure! I might as well eat the whole cake now.
Fortune Telling Predicting that something bad will happen, without any evidence.	I've been studying hard, but I know that I'm going to fail my test tomorrow.
Emotional Reasoning Believing that bad feelings or emotions reflect the situation.	I feel anxious when I fly, so airplanes must not be safe.
Labeling Saying only negative things about yourself or other people.	I made a mistake at work. I'm stupid! My boss told me that I made a mistake. My boss is a total jerk!
'Should' Statement Telling yourself how you "should" or "must" act.	I should be able to handle this without getting upset and crying!
Mind Reading Jumping to conclusions about what others are thinking, without any evidence.	My friend didn't stop to say hello. She must not like me very much.
Mental Filter Focusing only on the negative parts of a situation and ignoring anything good or positive.	I met a lot of great people at the party, but one guy didn't talk to me. There must be something wrong with me.

T!P For more information about the connections between thoughts and other aspects of mental health, see our other Wellness Modules at **www.heretohelp.bc.ca**

how do I get out of a thinking trap?

Here are helpful strategies to challenge common thinking traps. Many people find their mood and confidence improve after working through these skills. You can also find worksheets to help you go through each step at **www.heretohelp.bc.ca**

1. Try to separate your thoughts from actual events

Ask yourself the following questions when something upsetting happens:
- What is the situation: What actually happened? Only include the "facts" of the situation that everyone would agree on.
- What are your thoughts: What are you telling yourself?
- What are your emotions: How do you feel?
- What are your behaviours: How are you reacting and what are you doing to cope?

2. Identify the 'thinking traps'

Take a look at the thoughts you've listed. Are you using any of the thinking traps and falling into distorted thinking patterns? It's common to fall into more than one thinking trap. Go back to the thinking trap list on page 2 and identify which ones apply to you and your current situation.

Don't try to get out of a thinking trap by just telling yourself to stop thinking that way.

This doesn't let you look at the evidence and challenge the thinking trap. When you try and push upsetting thoughts away, they are more likely to keep popping back into your mind.

3. Challenge the thinking traps

The best way to break a thinking trap is to look at your thoughts like a scientist and consider the hard facts. Use the evidence you've collected to challenge your thinking traps. Here are some ways to do that:

Examine the evidence: Try to find evidence against the thought. If you make a mistake at work, you might automatically think, "I can't do anything right! I must be a terrible employee!" When this thought comes up, you might challenge it by asking, "Is there any evidence to support this though? Is there any evidence to disprove this thought?" You might quickly realize that your boss has complimented your work recently, which doesn't support the idea that you're a bad employee.

Double-standard: Ask yourself, "Would I judge other people if they did the same thing? Am I being harder on myself than I am on other people?" This is a great method for challenging thinking traps that involve harsh self-criticism.

Survey Method: Find out whether other people you trust agree with your thoughts. For example, you might have trouble with one of your kids and think, "Good parents wouldn't have this kind of problem." To challenge this though, you can ask other parents if they've ever have any problems with their kids.

Conduct an experiment: Test your beliefs in person. For example, if you think you think that your friends don't care about you, call a few friends and make plans to get together. If you assumed that they will all say no, you may be pleasantly surprised to hear that they do want to see you.

aim for a balance in your thoughts

Once you have worked through some challenges, try to think of a more balanced thought to replace the old thinking traps. Let's use the following example:

Situation	Thoughts	Thinking Trap	Challenge
My friend didn't say hello when I passed her on the street.	She's so rude. She doesn't like me anymore.	Labeling Mind Reading	Examine the evidence: She has never been rude to me in the past. I have no proof she even saw me.

»» Balanced Thoughts

There could be lots of other reasons why she didn't say hello. She probably didn't see me and still likes me. I'll wait until the next time we meet before I jump to any negative conclusions about our friendship.

are all negative thoughts unhealthy thinking traps?

No—there are times when negative thoughts are realistic

It can still be helpful to find different ways of looking at the situation, though. Try to find a meaningful personal challenge in the situation. See if you can find any opportunities for personal growth or skills development. Many people coping with difficult situations find that their upsetting thoughts improve when they work on other coping skills, such as identifying the main sources of stress in their lives, problem-solving issues that they can control, and finding social support. For more on coping with stress, see **www.heretohelp.bc.ca.**

Help with healthy thinking

There are many workbooks and self-help manuals to help you to challenge thinking traps and build up your healthy thinking skills. We have listed some examples for you below. Healthy thinking is a key part of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT is an effective treatment approach for many substance use and mental health problems. Consider working with a qualified CBT practitioner if you need help developing your healthy thinking skills.

{ **Frequent distressing, unwanted or strange thoughts may be a sign of a mental health or substance use problem.**
Fortunately, help is available. If you or a loved one struggles with upsetting or unusual thoughts, it's best to talk to a doctor or mental health professional. }

T!P Practice your healthy thinking skills with our online worksheet at **www.heretohelp.bc.ca**

Select sources and additional resources

- Visit **www.comh.ca** for *The Antidepressant Skills Workbook* by Dan Bilsker and Randy Paterson.
- Visit **www.anxietybc.com** for AnxietyBC`s realistic thinking guides and worksheets.
- Visit **www.heretohelp.bc.ca** to read the CBT issue of *Visions: BC's Mental Health and Addictions Journal*.
- Bourne, E. J. (2010). *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* (4th ed.). Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Burns, D.D. (1999). *The Feeling Good Handbook*. New York: Plume.