

HANDOUT 25: PROBLEMATIC THINKING STYLES

Problematic Thinking Styles are inaccurate or incorrect thinking patterns people often have in reaction to everyday events that make them feel upset or distressed. If you can identify when a thought you are having is a Problematic Thinking Style, it means that the thought is not completely accurate, and you should change it to a more accurate one. Changing inaccurate thoughts to more accurate ones can reduce or eliminate distressing feelings. Listed below are some of the most common Problematic Thinking Styles.

All-or-Nothing Thinking

The world is black or white, or seen in extremes. For example:

- “If you’re not perfect, you’re a failure.”
- “The world is a totally dangerous place.”

If you think this way, try to find the gray area.

Overgeneralization

You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern. You think, without proof, it will happen again and again. For example:

- “Because I witnessed a shooting, I know it’s going to happen again to me.”
- “Bad things have *always* happened to me, and they *always* will.”

If you think this way, try to come up with an example that does not fit the pattern.

“Must,” “Should” or “Never” Statements

These are unwritten rules or expectations for how you behave that you feel you *must* or *should* live up to. They are emotional or behavioral responses to situations that you believe can never be changed. They can make you feel uncomfortable, anxious, afraid, sad, or angry. For example:

- “I should be able to handle this.”
- “The government should be doing more to help me.” “I must stop thinking about the disaster.”
- “I will never feel better.”

If you think this way, try to be flexible with the rules.

Catastrophizing

These thoughts come when you focus on the most extreme negative consequences and expect the worst to happen. These thoughts can make you feel very afraid and anxious. Many times they are triggered by “what if” thoughts. For example:

- “What if there is another disaster?”
- “I’m sure the government won’t give me any compensation for my injuries and my family will go broke.”
- “I’m worried the noise I heard outside my window is someone trying to break in and hurt me and my family.”

If you think this way, ask yourself what is the most likely outcome.

Emotional Reasoning

This happens when what you feel determines what you think. Although it is important to pay attention to how you feel, your feelings can deceive you. In fact, if you are anxious most of the time, your feelings are almost certainly lying to you. For example:

- “I am very anxious right now, and therefore I’m going to lose control and go crazy.”
- “I feel panic; I must be in danger.”
- “I feel ashamed, so I must be a bad person.”
- “I feel guilty, so I must have done something wrong.”

If you think this way, ask yourself if there are ever times when your emotions are inaccurate.

Overestimation of Risk

This occurs when you assess risk to be much greater than evidence would support. This way of thinking can lead to feeling a lot of anxiety. For example:

- “I’m not going to take a walk because I might get caught in a storm.”
- “I can’t fly because the plane might crash.”
- “I need to move my family out of the city to keep them safe.”
- “I’m not going to drive because I might get into a car accident.”

If you think this way, try to calculate the actual probability of the event.

Self-blame

This style of thinking involves a tendency to blame yourself for any negative outcome. People who engage in self-blame are not able to accurately assess what is their fault, others’ fault, or no one’s fault—they tend to place all the blame on themselves. For example:

- “It’s my fault we lost our belongings.”
- “My spouse is upset with me, so I must be to blame.”

If you think this way, ask yourself if there is anyone else who might have some responsibility.