

FREE WORKSHEET · THOUGHTS & FEELINGS

Spotting Thinking Traps

Recognise the patterns that make things feel worse than they are

When we are tired, stressed or anxious, the mind takes shortcuts. Some are useful. Others, often called thinking traps or cognitive distortions, make a situation feel more threatening, more personal or more permanent than it really is.

Everyone falls into them. The aim is not to stop having these thoughts, but to notice them sooner and question them before you act on them.

IF YOU NEED HELP NOW

If there is an immediate risk to life, call **999**. The Samaritans are available free, 24 hours a day, on **116 123**. In England, NHS 111 (option 2) connects to an urgent mental health service.

01

Common traps, and how they sound

TRAP	WHAT HAPPENS	HOW IT CAN SOUND
All-or-nothing	Seeing things in two categories only, with no middle ground	"If it isn't perfect, it's a failure."
Mental filter	Noticing only the negative and screening out the rest	"Everyone liked it, but I stumbled once, so it went badly."
Shoulds and musts	Turning preferences into rigid rules	"I should be coping better than this."
Mind reading	Assuming you know what others think, usually something critical	"They think I'm not good enough."
Catastrophising	Jumping to the worst possible outcome	"If this goes wrong, everything falls apart."
Fortune telling	Predicting things will go badly, and that you won't cope	"It's going to be a disaster."
Labelling	Turning one action into a judgement about who you are	"I forgot again. I'm hopeless."
Overgeneralising	Treating one event as a never-ending pattern	"This always happens to me."
Discounting the positive	Dismissing what went well	"That was just luck."
Emotional reasoning	Treating a feeling as evidence of a fact	"I feel useless, so I must be."

TRAP	WHAT HAPPENS	HOW IT CAN SOUND
Personalising	Taking responsibility for things that were not only, or at all, yours	"They're in a bad mood. It must be something I did."
Blaming	Placing all responsibility elsewhere, so nothing can change	"There's no point. Other people make it impossible."

Many of these overlap, and one thought can hold several. They feel completely true in the moment and look far less certain once they are written down.

02

Catch one of your own

WHAT HAPPENED?	THE THOUGHT	WHICH TRAP(S)?	A MORE BALANCED THOUGHT

Questions that help you find the balanced thought:

- What is the evidence for this thought, and against it?
- Is there another way of seeing this?
- If a friend had this thought, what would I tell them?
- Will this matter in a month? In a year?
- What is the most likely outcome, rather than the worst?

REMEMBER

A thought is something your mind produces, not a fact. Writing it down is often enough to loosen its grip.