

Guide 5

Thinking Traps



In Guide 4, we discussed how our thinking habits affect our beliefs about why situations occur, and our predictions about what will happen next. In this guide, we'll deal more specifically with common thinking traps and how they contribute to the development of our thinking style.

What are thinking traps and how do they develop?

Our five senses take in far more information about our daily activities and associations than our brains can process, so we take “mental shortcuts” to simplify the information and make sense of it, especially in times of stress. These shortcuts are *automatic* and largely *unconscious*. They trap us into drawing conclusions prematurely, hence the name “thinking traps.”

How do thinking traps affect our ability to respond with resilience?

Cognitive science suggests that we have a strong bias when we process information. We tend to use only the information that supports the beliefs *we already hold* about a situation, and we *filter out* information that does not support our beliefs. This is called “confirmation bias.” Our confirmation bias can stop us from using accurate and flexible thinking to assess situations, causing us to draw conclusions with less information than we need.³ As we discussed in Guide 1, accurate and flexible thinking can help us bounce back from stressful situations and adversity.

What are some common thinking traps?

While it's likely we've all been caught by most of the following traps at one time or another, each of us tends to be most vulnerable to two or three traps.³

- 1) Jumping to conclusions:** We make an assumption about a person or situation, with little or no evidence to back it up. All thinking traps involve jumping to conclusions in one way or another.
- 2) Personalizing:** We assume blame for problems or situations for which we are not primarily responsible. This is characteristic of “Me” thinking, referred to in Guide 4. When done habitually, it

can lead to a loss of self-worth, and over-experiencing sadness and guilt.

- 3) Externalizing:** We erroneously blame others for situations for which they are not primarily responsible. This “Not me” thinking can result in anger and relationship problems, as discussed in Guide 4.
- 4) Mind-reading:** We assume that we know what *others are thinking* without checking with them. Or, we expect others to know what *we are thinking* without telling them. One example of falling into the mind-reading trap is concluding that people have been talking about us when they fall silent as we enter the room.



Or, we might think that our significant other should know that we're “too tired to go out tonight” despite the fact we haven't told him/her.

Mind-reading can be at the core of many difficulties in both our work and personal relationships because it involves making assumptions about who is to blame for situations.

- 5) Emotional reasoning:** We make false conclusions about an experience based on how we *feel* rather than on *the facts*. For example, we might feel relieved after a long, difficult conversation with a friend. However, our feelings of relief may colour our perception of the actual conversation. Thus, we may end up feeling surprised and dejected when our friend remains dissatisfied with the relationship.



Emotional reasoning can contribute to “Me” and “Not me” thinking. For instance, if we already feel down or sad, we may assume that we are at fault for a situation. If we are tense and angry, it is more likely we would see others at fault.

Emotional reasoning is also related to “shoulding”—the expectations about what we or others *should* or *shouldn't* do. “Shoulding” directed at ourselves can make us feel miserable, lead to procrastination, and take the joy out of life. Directed at others, it can lead to unrealistic expectations, labelling and stereotyping.

6) Overgeneralizing: We make sweeping judgments about someone or something based on only one or two experiences. For example, we might believe that something can't be done because of a single difficulty or failure in the past. Or, we might view a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.

Overgeneralizing can lead to a harsh view of ourselves and others, stereotyping, and discrimination. We might judge a whole group of people based on our experiences with a few. Overgeneralizing is consistent with “Always/Everything” thinking, as discussed in Guide 4.

7) Magnifying/minimizing: We overemphasize certain aspects of a situation and shrink the importance of other aspects. Some of us magnify the *negative* and minimize the *positive*. We do this by exaggerating the importance of our own or others' mistakes, or by making “mountains out of molehills.” This “Always/Everything” thinking can cause us to feel overwhelmed, discouraged, or angry.

Others magnify the *positive* and minimize the *negative*. We ignore the negative aspects to maintain a positive spin on a situation. This can lead to self-deception, which prevents us from dealing with situations that require attention. We might also overemphasize the positive contributions we make, while minimizing the efforts of others.

8) Catastrophizing: We assume something bad is going to happen, or we exaggerate how bad a situation will be. This involves linking a series of negative thinking traps, such as magnifying/minimizing, overgeneralizing, etc. For example, when we don't get the promotion we apply for, we begin to imagine the worst case scenario:

I didn't get a promotion because my supervisor doesn't like me. And that means I'll never get promoted. I'll be stuck at the bottom of the pay scale. And that means I'll never get my own apartment. And that means I'll never be independent. And that means...



At the end of this guide, you'll find a chart summarizing the common thinking traps discussed in this section.

For further information about thinking traps and how to avoid them, see Chapter 5 of *The Resilience Factor* by Reivich and Shatté.



Common Thinking Traps & Thinking Style Links

| Thinking Traps | Description | Examples |
|---|--|--|
| Jumping to Conclusions | Making assumptions with little or no evidence to back them up (All thinking traps involve making assumptions.) | Melinda comes home, the house is quiet, and the living room is a mess even though her significant other was home all day. She thinks, <i>"Well, looks like he's gone out and left the mess for me."</i> He calls downstairs, <i>"Melinda, I'm in bed with the flu."</i> |
| Personalizing (“Me” thinking) | Blaming oneself for problems for which one is not primarily responsible | <i>"The kids are so hyper today. It's my fault. I'm just not cut out for this kind of work."</i> |
| Externalizing (“Not me” thinking) | Blaming others for things for which they are not primarily responsible | <i>"If she had pulled her weight, our team would have come out on top."</i> |
| Mind Reading (Contributes to “Me”/ “Not me” and “Always/ Everything” thinking) | Assuming we know what another person(s) is thinking Expecting another person to know what we are thinking | <i>"He thinks I'm a poor choice for this position and that's why he's avoiding me."</i> <i>"If she really cared, she'd know that I'm too tired to go out tonight."</i> |
| Emotional Reasoning/ Shoulding (Contributes to “Me”/ “Not me” and “Always/Everything” thinking) | Making an assumption about an experience based on feelings rather than facts. Linked to thoughts of “I should” or “they should.” | Jan looks around at her untidy house and feels overwhelmed by the prospect of cleaning it: <i>"I should be able to keep things orderly, but it's hopeless. Why even try?"</i> |
| Overgeneralizing (Contributes to “Me”/ “Not me” and “Always/ Everything” thinking) | Making an assumption about someone (or a situation) based on only one or two experiences Assuming the cause of a problem is due to a character flaw instead of a person's behaviour | <i>"People like her can't be trusted."</i> <i>"I am such a loser. I can't do anything right."</i> OR <i>"S/he is such a jerk. Why bother trying to talk with him?"</i> |
| Magnifying/Minimizing (Contributes to “Always/ Everything” and “Me”/ “Not me” thinking) | Magnifying the <i>negative</i> aspects of a situation and minimizing the <i>positive</i> Magnifying the <i>positive</i> aspects and ignoring the <i>negative</i> | James was laughing and playing during outside play, but told his mom, <i>"My day was terrible. Ben only wanted to play with Zach."</i> Jenna's best friend leaves a message saying she's really upset with her and wants to talk. Jenna thinks, <i>"We are such good friends; it can't be anything serious. She's probably just tired."</i> |
| Catastrophizing (Contributes to “Always/ Everything” thinking) | Exaggerating the likelihood that something bad will happen, or exaggerating how bad it will be | <i>"Oh, no. I misplaced the report. Now it will be late. And my boss will be mad. And I'll be fired. And I won't be able to pay my bills. And then ..."</i> |



How can we help children deal with their thinking traps?

Like adults, children can get trapped by their emerging beliefs about *why* things happen and *what will happen next*. A child might **jump to a conclusion** and say, “He’s not going to let me play with the truck.” After one thing goes wrong, a child may **magnify** the negative experience by saying, “My whole day is ruined!” A child might use **emotional reasoning**: “I’m mad at you. You aren’t invited to my birthday party.” Children are also not immune from **catastrophic** thinking: “Alba won’t play with me. She hates me. Everybody hates me. I’m never going to have any friends.”

When we use accurate and flexible thinking to assess our daily stresses and serious challenges, we role model a resilient view which children can imitate and eventually make their own. In addition, after acknowledging children’s feelings, we can gently challenge their assumptions and guide them to see the bigger picture. This guidance can help children develop important critical abilities, such as emotional regulation, impulse control, self-efficacy, and realistic optimism.

Refer to Section 2, Helping Children Build Resilience, for suggestions and activities to help children develop accurate and flexible thinking patterns.

What do teachers say about thinking traps?

I’m more aware now that I may be jumping to conclusions. This has made me think about my biases toward individuals I work with. It’s changed how I relate to them. –DW (centre supervisor)

I realized that I really am prone to make negative assumptions about people’s behaviour. Now I stop myself and try to talk with them, to find out what they were REALLY thinking. –SF (centre supervisor)

Knowing about thinking traps has given me a clearer picture of why people behave in certain ways—myself included. –BM (preschool teacher)

Identifying my traps has helped me with what I say to myself about situations. I’m less negative and look for other explanations for why something happens. –NB (kindergarten teacher)

When the children in my class jump to conclusions about sharing toys or playing with others, I find myself saying, “Did you ask if you could join the game?” or “Did you ask if you could have a turn?” I’ve found they often have made an assumption and, when they ask, the outcome is positive. –EW (preschool teacher)

Summary of Guide 5

Identifying Thinking Traps



What are thinking traps and how are they developed?

- Our five senses take in far more information than our brains can process.
- We unconsciously take “mental shortcuts” to simplify the information and make sense of it. These shortcuts can trap us by leading us to inaccurate conclusions, hence the name “thinking traps.”

How do thinking traps affect our ability to respond with resilience?

- Thinking traps cause us to draw knee-jerk conclusions based on inadequate information and, thus, reduce our accuracy and flexibility.
- *Accuracy* and *flexibility* are the cornerstones of resilient thinking.

What are some common thinking traps?

Some common thinking traps that contribute to “Me”/“Not Me” and “Always/Everything” thinking habits are

- **Jumping to conclusions:** drawing conclusions based on inadequate evidence
- **Personalizing/externalizing:** blaming ourselves/others for situations for which we/they are not primarily responsible
- **Mind-reading:** assuming we know what others are thinking, or expecting others to know what we are thinking
- **Emotional reasoning:** making a conclusion about a situation based on how we *feel* as opposed to facts and evidence. Emotional reasoning can lead to “shoulding,” i.e., *I should* or *s/he should*.
- **Overgeneralizing:** making conclusions based on only one or two experiences, which leads to “labelling” of oneself or others
- **Magnifying/minimizing:** overemphasizing the negative (or positive) features of a situation, while reducing the importance of the positive (or negative) features
- **Catastrophizing:** exaggerating the likelihood that something bad will happen, or exaggerating how bad a situation will be

How can we help children deal with their thinking traps?

- Children can get trapped by their emerging beliefs about *why* things happen and *what will happen next*.
- Adults can role model resilient thinking and healthy coping behaviour.
- After acknowledging children’s feelings, adults can gently challenge children’s assumptions and guide them to see situations more accurately.