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SKILL SHEET

Ten Thinking Traps

And how to get out of them

Common ways the mind twists things, and a thought record to untwist them.

How you read a situation shapes how you feel. **Thinking traps** (also called cognitive distortions) are habits of thinking that feel true in the moment but bend the facts, usually toward the worst. Everyone falls into them. Spotting them, and checking them on paper, is a core skill of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a talk therapy that works on thoughts and actions.

THE TRAPS

TRAP	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE	A MORE BALANCED THOUGHT
1. All-or-nothing	"I ate one cookie, so my diet is ruined."	One slip is one slip. Most things are partly good.
2. Overgeneralizing	"I always mess things up." "This never works."	Is "always" really true? When did it go differently?
3. Mental filter	Dwelling on one criticism, ignoring the praise.	What went right? Count the good along with the bad.
4. Mind reading	"Everyone thinks I'm incompetent."	I cannot know that. What else could explain it? I could ask.
5. Fortune telling	"I'll fail the interview, so why go?"	I can't know yet. What happened last time? I can go and see.
6. Catastrophizing	"She's late, so she must have crashed."	What is most likely? If it happened, how would I cope?
7. Emotional reasoning	"I feel stupid, so I must be stupid."	A feeling tells me how I feel, not what is true.
8. Should statements	"I should be further along by now."	Is this a rule or a wish? Try "I would like to..."
9. Labeling	"I'm a loser." "He's a jerk."	Describe what happened, not the person: "I made a mistake."
10. Personalizing	"My boss is upset, so it must be my fault."	People carry their own stress. What else could be going on?

Clue words: always, never, everyone, nobody, should, must, and guesses about what others think or what will happen.

A THOUGHT RECORD IN FIVE STEPS

1. **Catch it.** When your mood drops or spikes, write down the situation (facts only) and the feeling. Rate it from 0 (none) to 100 (the strongest you have felt).
2. **Write the thought.** What went through your mind? Pick the one that stings most.
3. **Name the trap.** Use the table. Naming it puts a little distance between you and the thought.
4. **Weigh the evidence.** List facts for the thought and facts against it. What would you tell a friend who thought this?
5. **Write a balanced thought, and rate the feeling again.** Aim for a thought that is honest and helpful. Any drop in the feeling counts.

EXAMPLE

STEP	WHAT I WROTE
Situation	My boss emailed: "Can we talk tomorrow?"
Feeling	Anxious, 80
Thought	"I'm going to be fired."
Trap	Fortune telling, catastrophizing
For	The email was short.
Against	My last review was good. She often sets up talks about new projects.
Balanced	"I don't know what it is about. If there is a problem, I can hear it and handle it."
Feeling now	Anxious, 40

MY THOUGHT RECORD

Situation, and feeling 0 to 100:	The thought:	The trap:
Facts for, and facts against:	A balanced thought:	Feeling now, 0 to 100:

Source. Adapted and rewritten from the Therapy in a Nutshell videos "Cognitive Distortions: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Techniques" and "How to Change How You Think" by Emma McAdam, LMFT. The trap names and the thought record follow standard CBT.

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