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TOP TEN THINKING MISTAKES

1. All-or-none thinking

Also known as polarized thinking and black-and-white thinking. You see in extreme terms where things are either good or bad, right or wrong, perfect or worthless, with no room in between the two. If a situation falls short of perfect you see it as total failure. When a young woman on a diet ate a spoon full of ice cream, she told herself, "I've blown my diet completely." This thought upset her so much that she gobbled down a whole quart of ice cream! This type of thinking contributes to drastic mood swings.

2. Overgeneralization

You see a single negative event, such as a romantic rejection or career reversal as a never-ending pattern of defeat by using such words as "**always**" or "**never**" when you think about it. A depressed salesman became terribly upset when he noticed bird dung on his windshield. He told himself, "Just my luck! Birds are ALWAYS pooping on my car!"

3. Mental filter

Also known as "*Tunnel Vision*." You pick out a single negative event or detail and dwell on it exclusively, so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors a beaker of water. Example: You receive many positive comments about your presentation to a group of associates at work, but one of them says something mildly critical. You obsess about his reaction for days and ignore all the positive feedback.

4. Discounting the positive

You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count". If you do a good job, you may tell yourself that it wasn't good enough or that anyone could have done as well. Discounting the positive takes the joy out of life and makes you feel inadequate and unrewarded.

5. Jumping to conclusions

You interpret things negatively when there are no facts to support your conclusions. There are two forms of this: *mind reading* and *fortune telling*. Mind reading is when, without checking it out, you arbitrarily conclude that someone is negatively reacting to you. Fortune telling is when you predict that things will turn out badly. Before a test, you may tell yourself, "I'm really going to blow it. What if I flunk?" If you're depressed you may tell yourself, "I'll never get any better." Using the words "**what if...**" are an indicator you could be jumping to conclusions.

6. Magnification

Also known as “*Awfulizing*” or “*Catastrophizing*.” You exaggerate the importance of your problems and shortcomings. You can also use your imagination to visualize the worst possible thing happening in any situation. The phrases “**I can’t stand it,**” “**That’s awful**” and “**That drives me crazy**” are good indicators that you may be magnifying. *Magnification* is the **Royal Road to Anxiety**. Alternately, *Minimization* does the opposite by making the seriousness of the problem much smaller than it really is.

7. Emotional reasoning

You assume that negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: “I feel terrified about going on airplanes. It must really be dangerous to fly.” “I feel worthless, so I must be worthless.” “If I feel this hopeless it means I’ll never feel better.” Trusting your emotions this way is like believing everything you read in *The National Inquirer*.

8. “Should” statements

You tell yourself in a demanding way that things should be the way you hoped or expected them to be. After playing a difficult piece on the piano, a gifted pianist told herself, “I shouldn’t have made so many mistakes.” This made her feel so disgusted that she quit practicing for several days. MUSTs, OUGHTs, and HAVE To’s are similar offenders.

Should statements that are directed against you lead to guilt and frustration. Should statements that are directed at others or the world lead to anger. Shoulds imply that reality must be the way you want it to be, not the way it really is. They often reflect unrealistic standards you are placing on yourself and/or others.

9. Labeling

This is an extreme form of all-or-none thinking. Instead of saying, “I made a mistake,” you attach a negative label to yourself: “I’m a loser.” You might also label yourself “a fool” or “a failure” or “a jerk.” Labeling is irrational because you fail to separate yourself from your behavior. Labels are useless abstractions that lead to anger, anxiety, frustration, and low self-esteem.

You may also label others. When someone does something that rubs you the wrong way, you may tell yourself, “He’s a jerk.” Then you feel that the problem is with that person’s “character” or “essence” instead of with their thinking or behavior. You think of them as totally bad, which leads to hostility and hopelessness about improving things and leaves little room for constructive communication.

10. Personalization and blame

Personalization occurs when you hold yourself personally responsible for an event that isn’t entirely under your control. When a woman received a note that her child was having difficulties at school, she told herself, “This shows what a bad mother I am,” instead of pinpointing the cause of the problem so that she could be helpful to her child. When another woman’s husband beat her, she told herself, “If only I were a better wife, he wouldn’t beat me.” Personalization leads to guilt, shame, and feelings of inadequacy. Some people do the opposite. They blame other people or their circumstances for their problems, and they overlook ways that they might be contributing to the problem. “The reason that my marriage is so bad is that my wife is totally unreasonable.” Blame usually doesn’t work very well because other people will resent being scapegoated and they will toss the blame right back in your lap. It’s like a game of hot potato – no one wants to get stuck with it.