Managing Mind Traps

Our thoughts drive our emotions, behaviors, and physiology.

Our beliefs impact what we think, how we feel, and what we do. Mental agility is a key to health! Thinking traps get in the way. These are overly rigid ways of thinking that can undercut our effectiveness. While there are many mind traps, we are going to focus on five of the most common.

Five Thinking Traps:

1. **Mind Reading Trap**: assuming you know what another is thinking or expecting the other person to know exactly what you are thinking. The assumptions are focused on the negative.
   - **Effect of Mind Reading**:
     - Blocks communication/Assuming: Because I assume I know or you know, I don’t ask!
     - Shuts others down and pushes them away

2. **Me Trap**: Believing you are the SOLE CAUSE of every setback and problem and are the cause of a lot of harm to others. “It’s all my fault!”
   - **Effects of the Me Trap**:
     - Avoidance/Isolation
     - Over-experience of guilt and sadness

3. **Them Trap**: Believing other people/circumstance are the SOLE CAUSE of every setback and problem. “My problems are YOUR fault: you have trespassed me, violated my rights.”
   - **Effects of the Them Trap**:
     - Blame/Lack of ownership of the solution.
     - Over-experience of anger, frustration, and aggression

4. **Catastrophizing**: Time spent RUMINATING the WORST CASE OUTCOME
   - **Effects of Catastrophizing**:
     - Blocks Action.
     - Over-estimation of THREAT
     - Underestimation of your own power to effect change
     - Loss of Focus
     - Effects our BODY, such as headaches, muscle tension, abdominal pain

5. **Helplessness Trap**: Believing the negative event is going to impact ALL events of your life and there is nothing you can do about it. It’s GLOBAL, PERVASIVE, PERSISTENT
   - **Effects of the Helplessness Trap**:
     - Passivity: feel stuck and helpless
     - Giving up and withdrawing
     - Over-experience of Depression and Hopelessness

**ACTIVITY**

**Detect Your Pattern**: Self-Awareness is an ingredient of resilience

Choose one of the following scenarios:
- You have a fight with your significant other
- You get negative feedback on a project at work or assignment at school
- You receive a text from a family member that they need to speak with you soon

Generate thoughts that illustrate each of the 5 thinking traps for this scenario.

Then, identify how you would feel, what your reactions would be and how each trap would affect your physiology.
Strategies to Challenge Mind Traps (and other types of counterproductive thoughts!):

1. **State the Evidence:**
   - Invite logic to balance out the rigid and negative thinking. Use vivid, concrete, specific evidence.
   - **Use sentence starter:** “That’s not true because...”

2. **Reframe** the way you perceive the situation:
   - Use more optimistic thinking. Think, challenge versus threat
   - **Use sentence starter:** “A more helpful way to see this is...”

3. **Plan** (productive when you are using catastrophic thinking trap):
   - Make a Contingency Plan.
   - **Use sentence starter:** “If x happens, I will y.”

**ACTIVITY**

**Challenge Your Mind Traps**

Identify a situation where you tend to fall into these thinking traps (Tip: Use “about to” moments for your practice (ex. you are about to go into a job interview).

1. Think of a situation that matters to you. You want to be at your best but you tend to fall into these thinking traps and have counterproductive thoughts.

2. Generate the counterproductive thoughts that you tend to have. Challenge yourself to notice which of those thinking traps do you tend to fall into in the situation you identified.

3. Craft for yourself three to five specific counterproductive thoughts that you might have in that situation.

4. Practice using each of the three strategies.
   - So remember, there's evidence. Use vivid, concrete, specific evidence that you can utilize to prove to yourself why that counterproductive thought isn't true. You might use a sentence starter, “that's not true because...”
   - Practice reframing. Make it a challenge, not a threat. Remember this is pulling on optimism, so you will start your sentence with “a more helpful way of seeing this”. And then challenge yourself to reframe how you're perceiving the situation.
   - **Plan.** If x happens then I will y.”

**Purpose of Practice:**

- **Whack a Mole:** t first it can feel as if you are using the skill like a tool. It helps to become proficient.
- **Changing the Belief:** over time, the belief fueling the thinking trap begins to change
- **Proactive:** n time, you can use the thinking skills proactively to help prepare you to face into challenges