

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

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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."

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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

Challenging Catastrophic Thinking

Often referred to as “imagining the worst case scenario.” Catastrophic thoughts are so vivid, they set off an intense reaction in the brain and body. They block purposeful action.



Types of Catastrophizing

1. **Downward Spiral:** The number of negative thoughts and outcomes multiply as the worry continues. Agitation grows increasingly more distressing.
2. **Scatter Shot:** Generating all sorts of different really bad things that might happen because of a given situation.
3. **Circling:** Ruminating around one primary thought; can be generated out of a combination of anxiety and depression.

Triggers of Catastrophic Thinking

1. **Ambiguity:** There is missing information or unclear expectations and while you wait for more information, the brain pushes you to interpret the worst-case scenario.
2. **High Stakes:** In an effort to be prepared, you may try to over plan by imagining everything that could go wrong.
3. **Preexisting Fear:** You are already afraid and may start imagining the bad outcome you half-expect to happen to you, a loved one, or something you care about (flying, public speaking, small talk).
4. **Feeling Fatigue:** Run down, tired, or depleted + prior three triggers = anxiety.

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Gain Self-Awareness

Start by writing down examples of times that you catastrophized.

Use the four triggers listed. Some typical triggers are:

1. Ambiguity
2. Something you value highly is at stake
3. You already fear the situation
4. You are run down or depleted

Try to generate situations that relate to those triggers, when you might catastrophize.

Then, you can utilize the following two strategies to manage your personal experiences of catastrophic thinking.

Strategies to Manage Catastrophic Thinking

Strategy One: Challenge Catastrophic Thinking

Step 1: Worst Case: Get it out. May feel like a run-away train. Anxiety increases.

Step 2: Best Case: Generate some positive emotion.

Step 3: Probable: What do you think is likely?

Step 4: Action: Create a purposeful action for each of the probable outcomes.

To manage the anxiety, what can you do? Name the likely catastrophic thought and prepare a thought that will help you refocus.

Strategy Two: Generate Positive Emotion:

Positive Emotion:

- Broadens attention and awareness
 - Increases creativity and flexibility.
 - Increased cognitive flexibility/mental agility
- Builds valuable resources
 - Joyful/happy -> play -> more social connection
 - Interest/curiosity -> explore/learn
 - Contentment/serenity -> rest, recharge
- Better physical and mental health
 - Returns the body to its baseline more quickly. You experience spikes in anxiety in the same way, but increase the body's ability to calm down more quickly.
 - Enables better sleep because it moves attention away from threat that increases bodily activation and calms the physiological responses of our body.

Ways to Promote Positive Emotion

1. Intentional Breathing: Taking full, deep, breaths for a number of counts.
 - Calms the nervous system which lowers heart rate, increases digestion, and regulates mood.
2. Mindfulness: Attention that is PRESENT focused and associated with less anxiety and more positive mood.
 - Increases our ability to regulate emotions, decrease stress, anxiety and depression. It can help us to focus our attention, as well as to observe our thoughts and feelings without judgment.
3. Gratitude: Directing attention to what is good, which rewires the brain to more readily take in positive cues.
 - Better physical and mental health
 - Stronger relationships: leads to increased expressions of thankfulness and positive interactions.
 - Stronger faith and spirituality
 - Increases helping behaviors
 - Reinforces values: humility, contentment, generosity, and an appreciation for beauty

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Practice Mindfulness Using Your Five Senses

Still your body. Focus on your physical surroundings.

Name:

- 5 things you can **see**
- 4 things you can **hear**
- 3 things you can **touch**
- 2 things you can **smell**
- 1 thing you can **taste**

Practice a Relaxation Breath

Breathe in for 7 seconds. Breath out for 5 seconds. Repeat.

Practice Box Breathing

(image retrieved from Twitter.com)



Developing a Gratitude Practice



Gratitude Practice Ideas – chose one that works for you!

1. Hunt for the Good Stuff
 - Every day, write about the things you are grateful for. Reflect on why you are grateful for this.
 - Challenge yourself, in a negative situation, is there anything you are grateful for. What are you grateful for through this struggle?
2. Return Your Attention to What You Have and Not on What You Don't
 - Create Visual Cues (poster, pics, etc.).
3. Send a Thank You
 - Send a thank you to those that have helped you, made a difference, etc. This can be to colleagues, friends, family members, professors/teachers.
4. The Three Blessings
 - Share the special events of the day. If alone – journal it. Or use social media.
 - If with others; take turns and share 3 each.
5. Text a Greeting
 - Text a morning and/or evening greetings with a loved one/friend far away. Consider making it a daily practice.
6. Commitment to Learn (Especially in the workplace and/or school)
 - Make a point of drawing attention to opportunities to learn and expressing thanks.
 - Thank others for the privilege of the opportunity to work together.
7. Silver Linings
 - Talk about highs/lows.
 - For lows, discuss any upsides to the bad things that happen.
8. Preserve the Moment
 - Get out into nature.
 - Take pictures of the things you see that bring a sense of positive emotion.
9. Sticky Notes
 - Find ways to use sticky notes to tell loved ones how to share what you appreciate about them.
 - Be creative! The unexpectedness creates its own sense of positive expectancy, appreciation and more!

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Design one or more of your own gratitude practices and describe them below:

Some principles to consider when designing an effective practice:

- Link to something you already do (e.g. talking to a particular person, taking a walk, eating dinner).
- Experiment with the frequency of your gratitude practice. Is it helpful to do this practice daily? Or would less frequent practice keep it fresh?

Be creative!