

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

Recognising the thinking habits that keep us stuck — a self-help guide from Wellness Counselling and Psychotherapy

Our thoughts shape how we feel and what we do. When we are anxious, low or under pressure, the mind takes shortcuts. These shortcuts — often called **unhelpful thinking styles** or cognitive distortions — feel completely believable, but they are interpretations rather than facts.

Noticing them is not about “thinking positively”. It is about thinking more accurately and kindly, so your feelings have a fairer starting point.

Common thinking styles

All-or-nothing thinking

“If it isn't perfect, it's a failure.”

Seeing things in black and white with no middle ground. One slip becomes total collapse.

Try instead: Ask: what would the grey area look like? What percentage went well?

Catastrophising

“What if the worst happens?”

Jumping to the most alarming outcome and treating it as likely rather than possible.

Try instead: Ask: what is most likely to happen? How have similar worries turned out before?

Mind reading

“They think I'm useless.”

Assuming we know what others are thinking, usually assuming the worst.

Try instead: Ask: what is the evidence? What other explanations are there for their behaviour?

Fortune telling

“There's no point — it won't work.”

Predicting the future with certainty, which often stops us from trying at all.

Try instead: Ask: am I stating a fact or a prediction? What small step could test it?

Mental filter

"The whole day was ruined."

Focusing on one negative detail while filtering out everything that went well.

Try instead: Ask: what am I leaving out of this picture?

Discounting the positive

"Anyone could have done that."

Dismissing achievements, compliments or progress as luck or as not counting.

Try instead: Ask: if a friend had done this, what would I say to them?

Emotional reasoning

"I feel anxious, so something must be wrong."

Treating feelings as evidence about reality.

Try instead: Ask: is this a feeling or a fact? Feelings are real, but they are not proof.

"Should" and "must" statements

"I should be coping better."

Rigid rules about ourselves and others that create guilt, pressure and resentment.

Try instead: Ask: could "should" become "it would be nice if" or "I'd prefer to"?

Labelling

"I'm a failure."

Turning a single behaviour or event into a fixed identity.

Try instead: Ask: can I describe what happened instead of naming who I am?

Personalisation and blame

"It's my fault they're upset."

Taking responsibility for things outside our control — or placing all blame elsewhere.

Try instead: Ask: what part is genuinely mine, and what belongs to circumstances or other people?

Overgeneralisation

"This always happens to me."

Using one event as evidence of a never-ending pattern; watch for *always* and *never*.

Try instead: Ask: is this literally always true? What are the exceptions?

Comparing

"Everyone else is managing better."

Measuring your inside experience against other people's outside appearance.

Try instead: Ask: am I comparing my full reality to someone's highlights?

A simple four-step practice

You do not need to argue with every thought. Practise this with one thought a day:

- **Notice.** Catch the thought and write it down in the words your mind used.
- **Name.** Which thinking style does it resemble? Naming creates a little distance.
- **Examine.** What is the evidence for and against? What would I say to a friend?
- **Rebalance.** Write a fairer, more workable thought — not falsely cheerful, just accurate.

Thought record

Use this structure in a notebook or on your phone:

Situation	Thought & feeling	Thinking style	Balanced view
What happened?	What went through my mind? How strong (0-100%)?	Which pattern fits?	What's a fairer way to see this?

Thoughts are events in the mind, not instructions and not facts. You can notice one, question it, and still choose your own next step.

This worksheet is for general self-help and is not a substitute for therapy. To arrange a free 15-minute enquiry call, visit www.wellnesscp.co.uk or email miriam@wellnesscp.co.uk.