

Dysfunctional Thinking Patterns

Below are examples of common patterns of distorted/irrational thinking and negative self-talk that create and perpetuate experiences of anxiety, depression, and/or low self-esteem.

Black-and-white, all-or-nothing, or polarized thinking: You look at things in extreme terms, focusing on negatives, frequently using words like *always, never, every, all, and none*.

- Anxiety: *"Things will never work out," "Everyone will be judging me."*
- Depression: *"I don't enjoy anything," "Nothing ever works out for me."*
- Low Self-Esteem: *"I fail at everything I do," "I'm totally incompetent."*

Magnification or catastrophizing / Negative focus or negative mental filter: Every mistake, failure, or perceived problem is dwelled upon and blown out of proportion.

- Anxiety: *"I failed this exam and now I will never get into college," "This lump is probably cancer."*
- Depression: *"I'm never going to be happy," "Things always seem to go wrong."*
- Low Self-Esteem: *"Since I didn't do well, I should probably just give up," "Everybody thinks I'm an idiot."*

Minimization: You underemphasize, dismiss, devalue, or ignore the positives. You might find yourself frequently saying, "Yeah, but..."

- Anxiety: *"Things have been going well but he will probably end up leaving me," "She complimented me but probably was just being nice."*
- Depression: *"I had a good day but it probably won't last," "I did okay in the interview but doubt I'll get the job."*
- Low Self-Esteem: *"Yeah, second place is okay, but I didn't win," "I did well because it was easy; anyone could do it."*

Tunnel vision or overgeneralization: You see only what fits in your frame of mind.

- Anxiety: *"People are out to get me," "Everything could go wrong."*
- Depression: *"Nothing ever works out," "I have perpetual bad luck."*
- Low Self-Esteem: *"Because I didn't make the team, I should quit playing," "I will never do it right."*

Name-calling or labeling: You assign yourself mean names and negative labels.

- Anxiety: *"I'm a freak," "I am incapable."*
- Depression: *"I'm a loser," "I'm such a failure."*
- Low Self-Esteem: *"I'm incompetent," "You idiot."*

Personalization or blame: You assume too much responsibility for a negative event, incorrectly deciding that what happened was entirely your fault.

- Anxiety: *"I should not have left," "I dropped the ball."*
- Depression: *"It's my fault that things went wrong," "I always ruin everything."*
- Low Self-Esteem: *"If I weren't so awkward, things would have gone better," "I'm just not smart enough."*

Assuming, jumping to conclusions, or predicting the future: You make unfounded judgments or assume the worst as your default. It often shows up in **mind reading**, when you assume others disapprove of or negatively judge you without valid reason.

- Anxiety: *"I'm going to fail," "It's never going to work out."*
- Depression: *"I will never be happy," "Nobody thinks I can do this."*
- Low Self-Esteem: *"He thinks I'm a loser," "She doesn't like me," "She said she liked it but probably was just being nice."*

Should statements: You think in rigid and often unrealistic terms, starting sentences (consciously or subconsciously) with *"I should," "I should not," "I must," "I cannot," "I need,"* etc. This creates feelings of anger, guilt, frustration, and resentment because, realistically, we cannot always meet the strict expectations and criteria that lay behind the "should."

- Anxiety: *"I should always do well," "I have to juggle everything without help."*
- Depression: *"Life should be easier," "I cannot deal with setbacks."*
- Low Self-Esteem: *"I must have everyone like me," "I cannot make mistakes."*

These patterns of thinking keep you trapped in a place of anxiety, depression, and/or low self-esteem. Engaging in this type of thinking can also create self-fulfilling prophecies. By identifying and eliminating dysfunctional thinking patterns, you can create change and improvements in your life.