Identifying and Challenging Thinking Errors

Error Type	Shorthand	Examples	Challenges
Dichotomous reasoning or **All or nothing thinking .** Situations and people are judged in terms of *either..or.* Everything has to fit in only one of two *boxes*.	**Two boxes**	*People are..*good or bad ;beautiful or ugly ; trustworthy or untrustworthy *Things I do are...*successful or a failure ; perfect or disastrous ; right or wrong	Think of putting a third box in between the two extremes. Try to see things arranged in a line – person A is more trustworthy than Person B, who is more trustworthy than Person C….
Arbitrary inference or **Jumping to conclusions.** You judge a situation on the basis of random bits of evidence. This includes *mind-reading* (knowing what other people are thinking) and *fortune-telling* (being able to predict the future). It is like guess work.	**Guess work**	He crossed the road to avoid me. She thinks I look ridiculous.	Reality checking – how do you know he crossed the road to avoid you ? What other explanations are there ? How do you know what she is thinking ? Can you read all her thoughts ?
Magnification and minimisation or the **Binocular trick.** Negative bits loom large and positive bits seem lost in the distance. *Catastrophising* is when you exaggerate the significance of the negative aspects, either give them more importance than is realistic or predict negative outcomes that are extreme.	**Mini-max**	The meal was terrible because the soup had too much salt in it. It was a complete disaster, they will never talk to me again	Try to get a better perspective. Ok, the soup was a bit salty for some people, but the main course was delicious and everyone ate their dessert. Sometimes it is a question of finding the right words. If the milk saucepan boiling over is a « disaster », how would you describe the chimney falling down ? How likely is it that your all your friends will turn against you if your cooking is not perfect ?
Personalisation. There are two ways of understanding this. There is a tendency to take the blame for things that you cannot be responsible for, and /or the tendency to believe that everything is directed at you.	**Me, my, I**	It is my fault that my friends did not enjoy the film we went to see.	How were you responsible ? You did not act in the film, or write the screenplay or direct it. They chose to see it with you.

Discounting the positive or **Reverse alchemy**. Something positive is turned into a negative.	**Gold to lead**	He only said something nice because he wants me to do him a favour. She would not be so kind to me if she knew what I was really like.	The first step is to get into the habit of recognising something as positive. Then challenge the evidence you use to make it a negative. Maybe she does not know you completely, but she likes what you did.
Over-generalisation. A single example or situation is seen as the norm. Characterised by the use of absolutes such as *always, never, nobody, evrybody*.	**Absolutely**	Nobody likes me The traffic lights are always red when I'm in a hurry	Look for the exceptions ot the rule. Well, my friend John likes me. There was at least one time when the lights were green when you were in a hurry.
Global judgements or **Awfulising** or **Labelling.** You label or judge a *specific* situation or person in an extreme way.	**Bad labels**	Steve our builder is completely incompetent	Perspective – did he do anything right ? *Note* - if you said " all builders are incompetent ", this would be an *over-generalisation.*
Moral imperatives. We accept without questioning all the *musts, shoulds and oughts* that underlie daily life.	**Do's & Don'ts**	I must stay in control. You should do as I say	Start to question the origin and validity of these rules for living. Do they come from childhood ? Do they apply all the time to everyone in all situtations ? Look for exceptions.
Emotional reasoning. Here we mistake our feelings for facts.	**Heart over head**	I know something dreadful will happen because I feel so anxious	Remember the CBT model – thoughts give rise to feelings. You feel anxious because you think something dreadful will happen. Thoughts are *not* facts. My thinking the moon is made of cheese does not make it so.
Selective abstraction. A person or situation is judged on the basis of a small negative detail without reference to the whole.	**Small detail**	I decorated the room but that bit in the corner has gone wrong.	Is this really the most important part of the job ? Are you looking at the whole picture ?

Further Guidance

- Sometimes a thought will fit into more than one of the categories above. This is fine. Use the thought-challenging strategy that seems to work best. It is often a case of trial and error. See below.
- Seven Golden Questions :
    - What is the evidence that proves my belief is true ?
    - Is there any evidence to suggest the belief is not true ? (i.e., another way of looking at the situation ?)
    - What are the consequences for me of believing it is true ? (e.g., in terms of how it makes me feel and behave)
    - What if it really is true. Why would that be so bad ?
    - How could I cope with the situation if it really is true ?
    - Is there anything else I can change in my thinking or behaviour to help me feel and cope better ?

Common Confusions

1. **Global judgement or Over-generalisation ?**
   A global judgement or negative label is typically applied to a specific person or event – your judgement is likely to be powerful and negative because of focusing on a particular aspect to the exclusion of all else. It may be the result of other thinking errors – e.g. selective abstraction leading to a global judgment.

   Over-generalisation is deriving a rule to describe all types of situations or people on the basis of limited experience – all builders are incompetent, all seaside resorts are awful.

2. **Selective abstraction or Maximisation ?**
   Selective abstraction is about focusing on a small negative detail and not seeing the whole picture.

   Maximisation is the same processing bias, but it takes it a stage further – the consequences of the negative aspects are seen as catastrophic.

   Mnemonic – those of you so inclined may have seen that by taking the initial letter of each of the main thinking errors listed in the above table we get DAMP DOG MESs. The last "s" is spare! Helpful for exams.