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COUNSELING

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

Sometimes we think about ourselves or the world around us in biased ways without even really realizing it, and it can often be very unhelpful. Remember, the way that we think about things has a big impact on how we feel and how we behave. Here are some of the common thinking mistakes that people make.

All or nothing thinking -- Sometimes we see things in a really black and white way. We may label things as all good or all bad. Recognizing that things often happen in the gray areas is important for combatting this unhelpful thinking style.

Over-generalizing -- Our minds often take one specific event and generalize the results to other areas of our lives. For example, if you fail a test in school, you may over generalize and think that you are “bad at taking tests.” Looking for examples that contradict the generalization can help you find more balanced ways of thinking about events.

Filtering out the positive -- Our brains generally remember the negative experiences that we have easier than the positive experiences we have. If 3 positive things happen during the work day, but 1 negative occurs, you might tell someone that you had a bad day at work because your mind is filtering out the positive. This can affect how realistically you look at a certain situation. Intentionally noticing both the positive and negative events can help you to develop a more accurate picture of things.

Mind Reading -- Mind reading is assuming that you know what someone else is thinking. When you make those assumptions it can cause you to make inaccurate inferences about something. For example, “She thought I wouldn’t notice that she is simply restating what I already said” may cause you to assume that someone is taking credit for your thoughts, but the reality is that perhaps she is trying to ensure that your point is heard or that she pre-occupied when you made the same statement and didn’t actually realize she was saying the same thing. Reminding yourself that you can not really tell what people are thinking can help you to identify the other things that could be happening.

Catastrophizing -- Sometimes when we are upset about something we slip into thinking that things are much worse than they actually are. If you have to buy a new refrigerator unexpectedly and you think “I’ll never be able to save enough money to retire” you might be catastrophizing. Stop and take some time to see if there is evidence that supports the situation being that bad or if perhaps it is a negative situation, but that there are other potential outcomes.

Emotional Reasoning -- While our emotions do tell us very important things, we sometimes assume that our emotions are rational when that may not be the case. For example, if you are thinking about

changing your job, but you feel worried you might think “If I’m feeling scared I probably shouldn’t make the change.” The reality is that it is normal to feel nervous about changing jobs and you might need to gather other evidence to see if it is the right choice.

Labeling -- labeling means putting a name on something and sometimes this can cause a problem. Instead of thinking “my cousin was kind of short with me after he got off work” you might think “He’s rude”. Labeling people or things puts them in categories that may not be accurate. When you find yourself putting things in categories and make sure the label really fits.

Fortune telling -- Sometimes we try to tell the future even though we can’t really know what will happen. For example, if you are giving a presentation the following day and you think “I’m gonna really mess this up” you are fortune telling. This can be unhelpful because these types of thoughts can become self-fulfilling prophecies. When you start predicting the future remind yourself that there are other outcomes possible.

Personalizing -- Thinking that the world revolves around us is natural, but isn’t always helpful. If a friend doesn’t call us back and we assume it is because he is mad at us we may behave in a way that is reflective of that. The reality is that maybe your friend didn’t call because he has been busy or lost his phone.