



5 Thinking Traps and How to Avoid Them

By Southeast Health Group

That constant stream of chatter that runs through our heads everyday has a powerful influence on our emotions and behavior. When your boss calls and asks you to come into her office, what goes through your mind? When a teacher calls and wants to talk about your child's school performance, how do you react? Sometimes we fall into thinking traps that keep us from communicating clearly and getting the results we want. Have you fallen into one of these traps?

Mindreading is a trap where you believe you already know what someone is thinking, or you believe they should know what you are thinking. People trapped in mindreading forget to talk to others and ask questions. They act on assumptions, and we all know how that turns out.

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The ME trap happens when a person thinks he or she is the sole cause of a problem. People stuck in the ME trap feel a lot of guilt and self-blame.

The THEM trap happens when a person thinks that others are solely responsible for a problem. Getting caught in the THEM trap can result in anger and aggression and cause you to lash out at the people you feel are to blame.

Catastrophizing is when a person makes a situation worse and worse in his mind without getting the facts. This trap distorts the truth by creating a runaway train of every bad thing that could possibly happen.

The helplessness trap is a thought pattern that gives up control over a situation. People withdraw and become passive when they feel powerless to change a situation instead of looking for needed resources.

Dr. Karen Reivich of the University of Pennsylvania developed a skill called “Real-time Resilience” to help people deal with counterproductive thoughts and build motivation and focus on the task at hand. She teaches three sentence starters that help you talk yourself out of a thinking trap.

So when your boss calls you into her office and you automatically think you are getting fired, say to yourself: “That’s not true because...” and finish the sentence with evidence that backs up your claim. For example: “That’s not true because I surpassed all my sales goals last month and I know she was pleased.”

Another sentence starter helps to reframe your negative thought by saying, “A more helpful way to see this is...” finishing the sentence with a more positive response. For example: “A more helpful way to see this is that I have no idea what my boss wants to talk to me about.



I will just stay curious until I go in and talk to her.”

Lastly, if you are imagining a negative outcome, try making a plan. The sentence starter goes like this: “If x happens, I’ll do y.” In other words, “If I get fired, I’ll just take my sales records and go ask our competitor for a job.” Having a plan with other options can relieve anxiety and help you feel more control over a situation.

When you find yourself caught in a thinking trap, talk yourself out of it by using one of the sentence starters to inject evidence, reframe a negative thought, or make a plan. With a more positive mindset, you are more likely to achieve the results you want.

For more information about cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), contact Southeast Health Group at 1-800-511-5446, or find us on the web at www.southeasthealthgroup.org.