The 5 Thinking Traps

Thinking traps can happen without us even thinking about it (!). This worksheet aims to bring awareness to the thinking trap situations and effects.

When you start to tune your ear to thinking traps, you may discover **one or two** are more dominant for you, or that different ones come up in different domains (i.e. at home, work, or school). You don't have to think of examples for each thinking trap below; you can choose one or two that you experience most frequently.

Examples and Activity

1. Mind reading trap

Mind reading is assuming you know what another person is thinking or expecting that the other person knows what you're thinking, e.g. assuming they are thinking something negative about you. Rarely when we're mind reading do we assume someone is thinking great things about us.

Effects: Blocks communication as you already believe you know exactly what they're thinking. We don't ask or reach out. Therefor can have a negative effect on relationships.

For example

The situation: I was late to meet a friend
The thought: *"They must think I'm so disorganised"*
The effects: Spend the whole catch up distracted by the thought and not listening to what they were saying.

Give an example of a mind-reading trap you've experienced

The situation:

The thought:

The effects:

2. Me trap

Believing you are the sole cause of every setback and problem, and therefore probably also believing that you are causing harm to others.

Effects Over feeling guilt or sadness, feeling like you've done something wrong, feeling disappointed with self.

For example

The situation: A colleague leaves a meeting in a hurry
The thought: *"They rushed off because something I said offended them"*
The effects: Guilt, worry, anxiety, can't sleep that night, analyse what I could have done to upset them and how I will apologise.

Jot down an example of a Me trap you've experienced

The situation:

The thought:

The effects:

3. Them trap

Flip side of me trap. Other people or circumstances are the sole cause of your setbacks and problems.

Effects: Anger and aggression, blaming, reduced empathy.

For example

The situation: The hospital ask me to produce a referral from the GP for my check ups.
The thought: *"They don't understand how hard it is for me to get to a GP, they should have told me earlier that I needed a referral and given me time to get it, their system is flawed."*
The effect: Frustration at the person on the phone, raised voice, adrenaline in body, anger.

Can you think of an example of a Them trap you've experienced?

The situation:

The thought:

The effects:

4. Catastrophizing trap

Wasting critical energy ruminating, thinking about the irrational worst case outcomes of a situation. Something happens and triggers you, and your mind is like a runaway train of worse and worse things that are going to happen. And you are stuck here, blocked from taking any action. There is an imbalance between your assessment of the trap and what's really happening – overestimating the threat and underestimating your resources and ability to cope.

Effects: Feeling anxious or agitated and not being able to focus or engage in any productive way.

For example

The situation: I don't get home in time to make the nutritious dinner I had planned for my kids and give them frozen pizza.
The thought: *"They're not going to get the vitamins they need, their bones won't grow, they'll expect pizza every night"*
The effect: Guilty and judging myself, unable to enjoy meal time with kids.

Can you think of an example of a Catastrophizing trap you've experienced?

The situation:

The thought:

The effects:

5. Helplessness thinking trap

When you believe that the negative event is going to impact all areas of your life and you have no control – the belief that bad things are here to stay, that circumstances are unchangeable.

Effects: Feeling of hopelessness and helplessness.

For example

The situation: Walk back to bike after work and the front tyre is punctured
The thought: *"I won't be able to fix it, which means I'll have to leave it at work, it might get stolen, I won't be able to do any exercise this week, I will be so unfit and unhappy."*
The effect: Upset, frustrated, down in the dumps, unable to find a workable solution for that moment (e.g. taking the bike on the train home and asking someone to help fix the tyre).

Can you think of an example of a Helplessness trap you've experienced?
The situation:

The thought:

The effects:

Real-Time Resilience

Use these techniques when a thinking trap stops you responding in a way that contributes to your wellbeing. Prepare alternative responses to challenge these thoughts on the spot; in 'real-time'.

1. Evidence

Use data to prove to yourself why that thought is not true. Make it vivid, like you are creating in your mind a picture that's going to crowd out the picture that the counterproductive thought has created.

Use the sentence starter: *"That's not true because…"* [insert evidence to prove why thought is false]

2. Reframe

Using optimism strategically, in the moment when you need to get the outcomes that you want. You reframe the way you're perceiving the situation.

Create an alternative response: "*A more helpful way to see this is…. [insert more optimistic perspective on the situation].*"

3. Plan

When your brain is starting to catastrophize, it generates a lot of anxiety, too much for the situation at hand. By creating an on-the-spot contingency plan, you can relax a little and go into the situation feeling more prepared.

Make a contingency plan: "If   happens, I will   "

Activity

Make a list of 5 counterproductive thoughts you might have in a given situation. You can use some of the ones you listed on pages 1 and 2.

For each counterproductive thought, use one of the strategies listed to generate a Real Time Resilience response. Use the sentence starters to formulate the response:
1. Evidence: That's not true because…..
2. Reframe: A more helpful way to see this is….
3. Plan: If … happens, then I will …

Situation:

Thought 1:

Real-time resilience - Evidence / reframe / plan:

Thought 2:

Real-time resilience - Evidence / reframe / plan:

Thought 3:

Real-time resilience - Evidence / reframe / plan:

Thought 4:

Real-time resilience - Evidence / reframe / plan:

Thought 5:

Real-time resilience - Evidence / reframe / plan:

Confident and importance ratings

How confident are you in putting this into practice? 1   10 (very confident)
How important is it to you to put this into practice? 1   10 (very important)