



Thinking Traps

Thinking Traps are thought patterns we all tend to fall into from time to time. They are thoughts based on assumptions or 'fantasy' as we'll refer to it here. Whilst these, like other assumptions, provide the mind with a shortcut they are seldom helpful or productive. It's not uncommon to experience all 10 traps in your thinking or find you have a 'favourite' one or two. The idea is to use this system described below to determine the reality of a situation, discern if your thinking is based on fact or fantasy and to re-empower yourself. Use the process any time you're having unhelpful or negative thoughts. This could be before an event, such as the thought "...they'll think I'm stupid and I'll never get that promotion", or after an event, "...what a moron John was, he really hacks me off".

So here's what you need to do:

Step 1. Take a piece of A4 landscape and divide into 3 columns.

Step 2. Head each column (i) Automatic Thought, (ii) Thinking Trap and (iii) Rational Thought

Step 3. Fill in the automatic column with those automatic thoughts, the 'voices' if you like, that you hear when things are going bad. As you will be the only person who sees this it is important to be honest, candid and avoid censoring.

Step 4: For each automatic thought see how many Thinking Traps you fall into and capture these in column 2. Treat this as bit of a game or competition. Try to spot as many as you can...perhaps ALL 10

Step 5: Given you've been able to associate your thoughts, and feelings, to a thinking trap(s) you will know by now that your responses are perhaps based on fantasy (or assumptions) and not reality. So...what is the reality. Capture this in column 3.

It is really important you do this whole process on paper, or in writing at least, and not in your head. Here's a simple worked example...

Automatic thought: "Damn...I can't believe it's raining again. I was planning a BBQ for the weekend. This country sucks, it always rains. I hate it".

Thinking Traps: Mental filtering, labeling, magnifying and minimizing, generalizing...quite a few hey!!!

Rational Thought: Whilst it's raining now it still may not rain for the weekend, besides we can put up that new gazebo we bought. As for living in the UK, you know what...I think I'd hate to live in a dry, scorched place. I like the green countryside here.

The Traps

1. Dichotomous thinking: This is black or white thinking. EG. I might say I'm a failure because I failed to meet my target for running a half marathon....but I only missed the target by 2 mins!



2. Generalising. Taking a single or small number of events and making them 'global'. It always rains on my day off. Always?
3. Mental filtering. Like a drop of ink in a beaker of water the negative event 'colours' your whole life.
4. Disqualifying the positive. This is a form of distortion where we turn positive events or language into something bad. Woman "you're looking really healthy at the moment darling". Man "Are you saying I was fat!"
5. Jumping to conclusions. Two forms (i) mind reading and (ii) fortune telling. Mind reading, "Fred didn't invite me to the party 'cos he doesn't like me". Fortune telling "I'm not going to apply for that new position 'cos I'll only make a fool of myself"
6. Magnifying & minimising. Known as the 'binocular trap'. We take an event and view the negatives with the high magnification of the binoculars BUT view the positives through the opposite end of the binoculars (making the positives look smaller than they are).
7. Shoulds, musts, oughts. Only designed to make someone/myself feel guilty or to justify our anger "John shouldn't turn up to these meetings late. He's really annoyed me!"
8. Labeling. "What a fool I am". "I didn't get the job. I'm a loser"
9. Emotional reasoning. We take the emotion and use it to justify how we think. 'I feel it therefore it must be true'
10. Personalising/Externalising. You see yourself as the whole cause of a negative event. The opposite is 'externalising'...you see someone else as the whole cause. Reality is almost always somewhere in the middle

References

Burns D.D (1999) Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy. Avon Books

Reivich et al (2002) The Resilience Factor: 7 Keys to Finding Your Inner Strength and Overcoming Life's Hurdles. Broadway Books