

Improve Staff Wellbeing - Thinking Traps and Models

How aware are you of your thinking and the traps you might fall into. This article could be the start to learn new skills and techniques.

Our Senses

Our five senses take in much more than our brain can process at any given time and we often take mental shortcuts to help make sense of things. These can be **automatic** and **unconscious** and mean we fall into thinking traps which can undermine our personal wellbeing.

Cognitive science has shown we have a strong bias when processing information. We tend to use existing information that support our beliefs and filter out information that doesn't. We regularly draw conclusions with less information than we need.

We need accurate and flexible thinking to effectively deal with stress (and adversity) and avoid these traps.

Common thinking traps you should avoid

1. **Jumping to conclusions** - making assumptions about people and/or situations with little or no evidence to support them. Before reaching any conclusions make sure you have facts to support you.
2. **Personalising** – assuming blame for problems and situations for which you are not primarily responsible, leading to a loss of self-worth, feelings of sadness or guilt. Even where you do make a mistake, the important part is to learn from it and use the experience to improve future performance.
3. **Externalising** – blaming others for situations they are not primarily responsible for, which can cause anger and relationship problems. Even if someone else has made a mistake, they are unlikely to have done it deliberately. Learn to forgive and coach them on what they could do differently.
4. **Mind-reading** – assuming we know what others are thinking without checking. Or we expect them to know what we are thinking without telling them. An example might be we walk into a room and it goes quiet so we think they were talking about us. This



Involves assumptions about blame and is at the heart of relationship breakdowns and trust issues.

5. **Emotional reasoning** – making a false conclusion about an experience based on how we feel, rather than the facts. So we may feel relieved after a performance management conversation and as a result assume by talking about it the problem has been resolved (when it hasn't). This can lead to incorrect expectations about what we or others should do. It can lead to feelings of inadequacy or being miserable, and to labelling or stereotyping of others.
6. **Overgeneralising** – making sweeping judgements about someone or situations, often based on single experiences. This can lead to a harsh view of ourselves or others and to people being judgmental.
7. **Magnifying / Minimising** – over emphasising and / or shrinking the importance of aspects of a situation, which can lead to overwhelm and self-deception.
8. **Catastrophising** – assuming something bad will happen or exaggerate how bad a situation will be. This is often linked with a number of negative traps, e.g. magnifying/ minimizing and overgeneralising. For example, when we don't get the promotion we apply for, we begin to imagine the worst case scenario: The fact that I didn't get a promotion means that my line manager doesn't like me. And that means that I'll never get promoted at work. And that means I'll be stuck at the bottom of the pay scale. And that means I'll never get my own apartment. And that means I'll always have to live with my family. And that means...

The above is a **list of the more common thinking traps** that people fall into. **Do you recognise any of them?**

The ABC Model (Dr Albert Ellis)

- **A** is the adversity—the situation or event.
- **B** is our belief—our explanation about why the situation happened.
- **C** is the consequence—the feelings and behaviours that our belief causes.

Adversity => Beliefs => Consequences

Example 1

A - Job interview didn't go well and others at the school are getting promoted.

B – **The reaction might be** 'I'm no good at interviews, I'm such a loser', or

B – 'That's disappointing, what went well and what can I do differently next time'.

C – **As a consequence** I feels sad, depressed, skip the gym and eat chocolate, or

C – I Focus on actions needed to create a new opportunity and ultimately succeed

Example 2

A - Exam has not gone well but I put in the same amount of work as others.

B – 'I'm no good at exams, no matter what I do, I'll never pass', or

B – 'That's disappointing, what did I do well and what can I do differently next time'.

C – I feel sad, depressed, and do less work (what's the point), or

C – I focus on actions needed to create a new opportunity and succeed

HOW TO USE THE ABC MODEL

Vividly recall a recent adverse event. After recording the A, fill in the C, then the B. Or, you might follow an ABC order. Choose the method that works best for you.

A: Describe the event objectively. Answer these questions: Who? What? Where? When?

B: Record your thoughts about the event. Why do you think it happened?

C: Record your feelings and actions.

You can continue to use a journal or note pad to record further examples.

COMMON B-C CONNECTIONS (© Reivich & Shatté. 2002. The Resilience Factor. New York: Broadway Books).

Beliefs

Consequences (emotions)

Violation of our rights



Anger

Actual loss or loss of self-worth



Sadness, depression

Future threat	→	Anxiety, fear
Violation of another's rights	→	Guilt
Loss of standing with others	→	Embarrassment

Thinking habits (Dr Martin Seligman) – Explanatory Thinking Style

Three questions people tend to ask in adversity:

1. Personalisation: Who caused the problem? Me/Not me
2. Permanence: How long will this problem last? Always/Not always
3. Pervasiveness: How much of my life does this problem affect? Everything/Not everything

Depressive thinking = Me/Always/Everything

Aggressive thinking = Not me/Always/Everything

Optimistic thinking = Not me/No always/Not everything (May be good for optimism but not always for realism).

WHAT'S YOUR EXPLANATORY (THINKING) STYLE?

Reflect on these questions:

In times of stress, do I often blame myself when things go wrong? ("Me" thinking)

Do I often blame someone else or the circumstances? ("Not me" thinking)

Do I often feel as if problems will be permanent and all encompassing?
("Always/Everything" thinking)

Do I typically look for aspects of problems that are temporary and specific? ("Not always/Not everything" thinking)

E.G. Something happens in the morning and I think it is therefore going to affect everything and be a hard day. This is permanency and pervasiveness thinking.

Having an awareness of your thinking style, the ABC model and thinking traps will help you learn to manage your thinking, no matter the number or scale of the challenges you face.

When you face adversity you can check against and avoid these and improve how you feel, your behaviours and performance. You can help to improve it for your colleagues and team members too. However, this means changing habits so will need practice, reflection and perseverance.

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