



Thinking traps

Stories the mind can tell - and questions that make room for a wider view

Our minds interpret the world quickly. This is useful, but when we are stressed, anxious, low, ashamed, overloaded or expecting danger, our thinking may become narrow and repetitive. CBT often calls these patterns unhelpful thinking styles or cognitive distortions.

A pattern is not a personal flaw

Everyone uses thinking shortcuts. Naming a pattern is not about proving that a thought is silly, forcing positivity or denying real discrimination, loss, trauma or danger. It is an invitation to pause and ask whether the first story is the only possible story.

Catch it, check it, widen it

1. Catch it

What happened, and what did my mind say?

2. Name the pattern

Does this resemble one of the thinking traps?

3. Check it

What supports the thought? What does not?

4. Widen it

What is a balanced, compassionate alternative?

Use the guide gently

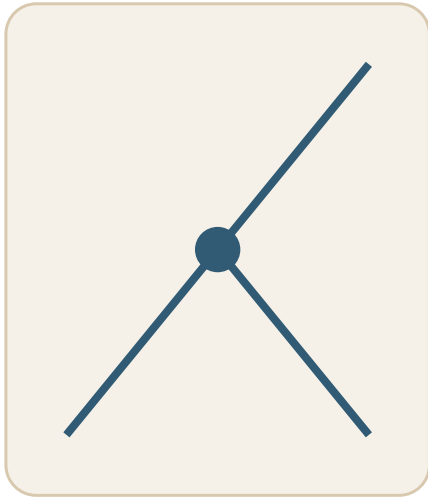
You do not need to argue with every thought. Sometimes noticing “my mind is telling a familiar story” is enough to create distance. If a concern involves real risk, practical action may be needed rather than reframing. If thought challenging increases rumination, OCD checking or self-criticism, pause and discuss a different approach with a qualified professional.

Thinking traps in everyday life

Two patterns to notice, understand and question



Jumping to conclusions



The pattern

Deciding what something means before enough information is available.

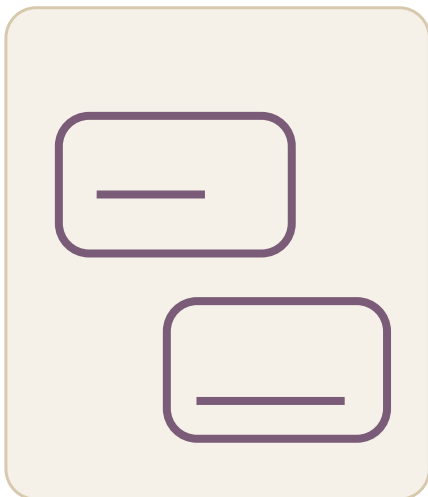
The mind might say

"They have not replied. They must be angry with me."

A flexible question

What facts do I actually have? What else could explain this?

Mind reading



The pattern

Assuming you know what another person thinks or feels without checking.

The mind might say

"Everyone noticed my mistake and thinks I am incompetent."

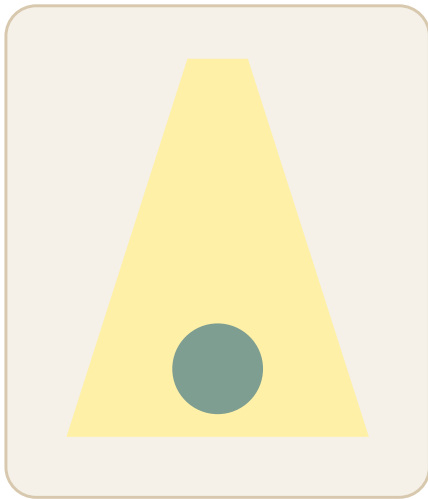
A flexible question

Could I be guessing? What would I learn by asking rather than assuming?

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Filtering out the positive



The pattern

Letting one negative detail eclipse neutral or positive information.

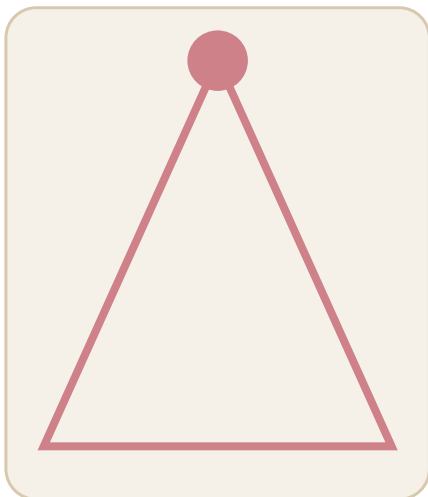
The mind might say

"Nine comments were kind, but the critical one proves I failed."

A flexible question

What am I leaving out? Can both the difficulty and the positives be true?

Magnification



The pattern

Making a difficulty feel enormous, permanent or impossible to manage.

The mind might say

"This delay has ruined everything. I will never recover from it."

A flexible question

How important will this feel later? What is the next manageable step?

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Two patterns to notice, understand and question

Catastrophising



The pattern

Treating the worst possible outcome as if it is the most likely one.

The mind might say

"If I feel anxious in the meeting, I will lose control and lose my job."

A flexible question

What is most likely, not merely possible? How would I cope if it were difficult?

Personalisation



The pattern

Taking excessive responsibility for events that have many causes.

The mind might say

"The group was quiet because I made the atmosphere awkward."

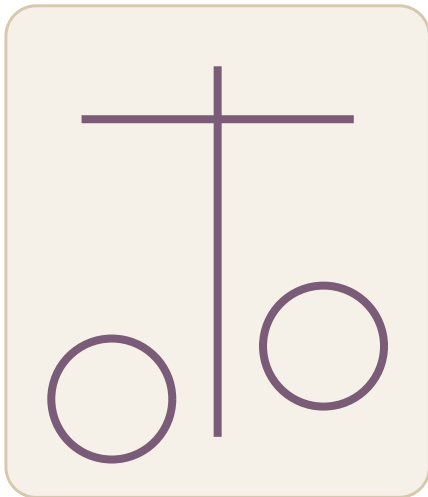
A flexible question

What other factors were involved? What part is mine, and what part is not?

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Two patterns to notice, understand and question

Emotional reasoning



The pattern

Treating a powerful feeling as proof that a conclusion is true.

The mind might say

"I feel guilty, so I must have done something wrong."

A flexible question

The feeling is real. Is the conclusion supported by evidence?

Minimising



The pattern

Shrinking achievements, needs or painful experiences until they seem unimportant.

The mind might say

"Anyone could have done that. My effort does not count."

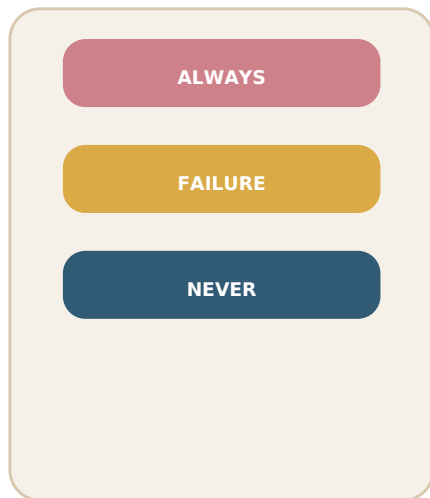
A flexible question

Would I dismiss this if it belonged to someone I cared about?

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Two patterns to notice, understand and question

Labelling



The pattern

Turning one action or difficulty into a fixed judgement about the whole person.

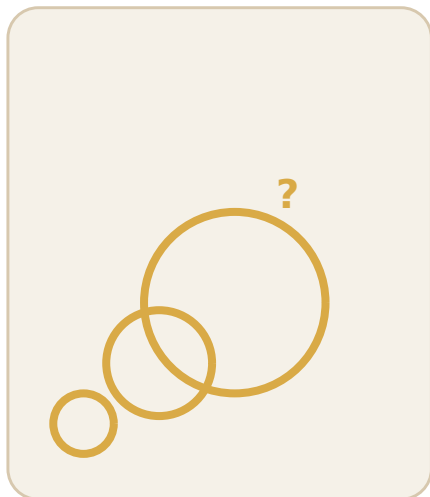
The mind might say

"I forgot the appointment, so I am useless."

A flexible question

Can I describe the specific behaviour without defining my identity?

Should statements



The pattern

Using rigid rules about how you, others or life must be.

The mind might say

"I should cope perfectly and never need help."

A flexible question

Is this a preference or an absolute rule? What would be kinder and more realistic?

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Overgeneralising

ONE EVENT



The pattern

Using one event to predict a broad, permanent pattern.

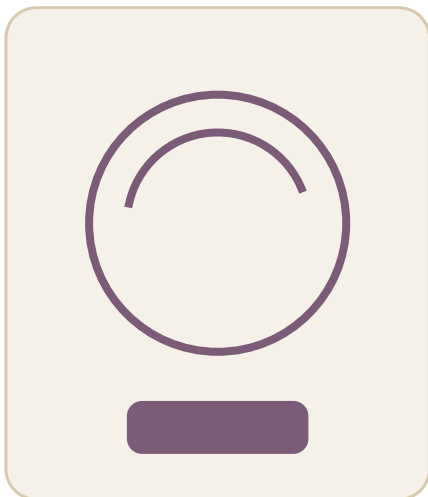
The mind might say

"I struggled today, so I always fail when things matter."

A flexible question

Is this always true? What exceptions or different outcomes can I remember?

All-or-nothing thinking



The pattern

Seeing only two extremes and missing the shades between them.

The mind might say

"If I cannot do the whole task, there is no point starting."

A flexible question

What would partial progress look like? Where is the middle ground?



Reflection and practice

Choose one recent situation and explore it without forcing certainty

The situation - what happened?

My first thought or interpretation

Feelings and body sensations

Which thinking trap might be present?

Evidence that supports the thought - and evidence it may be incomplete

A wider, fairer or more compassionate response
