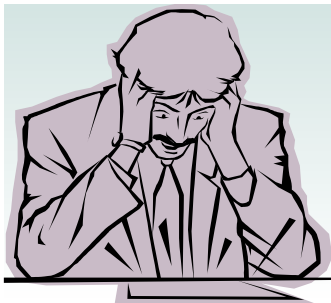


SOURCE LINES

REDUCE STRESS BY “UN-TWISTING” YOUR THINKING: STEP ONE—LOCATING YOUR “TWISTED” THOUGHTS

In last month's issue of **SOURCE LINES**, entitled “ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING”, we heard the idea that one way of reducing our *stress-load* was to change the way we think about things in our life and in the world around us. This doesn't mean changing the ‘facts’ in our life. It means changing the way we look at the ‘facts’ and what we consider to be relevant ‘facts’.



The best of us make distortions or errors in our thinking. We jump to conclusions. We let some personal slight or disappointment gnaw at us until the episode is all out of proportion. And most of us have our own *special brand* or well-developed ways of distort-

ing things. We put our special “twist” on life.

When we “twist” similar things over-and-over-again psychologists refer to us as having a *systematic negative bias*. It's the “half-empty-glass” way of seeing things. Over time, with practice, and by hanging out with like minded “twisters”, we can develop a pessimistic, overly critical, or overwhelming view of our circumstances and the people and world around us. In turn this negativity can lead us deep into unnecessary stress in the form of chronic depression, anxiety, anger, shame and guilt. All of which can totally weigh us down. All of which can ruin our health and relationships. But all can become some familiar to us. We can get so good at it that it's hard to recognize the errors or consider abandoning them. They are part-of-us.

Below is a list of some typical cognitive distortions (twisted thinking) all of us can fall into. The list has been developed over time by a number of people* who have sought to understand the connection between

how we **automatically think** about ourselves, others, and events in our lives and the **moods or emotional states** that result from the thoughts. These mental health researchers have tried to learn about where **attitude**—(mood and outlook)—comes from? Their goal was to assist people who become trapped in endless vicious cycles of distorted negative thoughts—darkened mood—more negative thoughts—darker mood, and-on-and-on-and-on.....

When you have some time carefully read through the list below. As you recognize distorted ways of thinking that remind you of your own thinking styles, write down the example. When you have made your list re-read the explanation and then make a commitment to catching yourself during the next few days to see just how often your “special twists” are woven into your way of seeing yourself and the world around you.

- 1) **All-or-nothing thinking** (also called **black-and-white, polarized, or dichotomous thinking**): You view situations in categories of black-and-white, instead of on a continuum of shades of gray. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.
- 2) **Magnification (Catastrophizing) or Minimization**: You exaggerate the importance of things such as your goof-ups so that they seem like terrible mistakes. You look at your mistakes through a microscope that makes them appear gigantic. You predict the future negatively without considering other, more likely outcomes. Similarly, you diminish your own desirable qualities and magnify those of others.
- 3) **Disqualifying or Discounting the Positive**: You unreasonably tell yourself that positive experiences, deeds, or qualities do not count. If someone gives you a compliment you tell yourself, “They're just

being nice.” Basically you see yourself as a second-rate person and save up all your mistakes or negatives as evidence while ignoring positive experiences. In the end you become expert at feeling miserable and utterly unable to appreciate good things when they happen.

4) **Emotional Reasoning**: We can all do this so easily when we “feel” something so very strongly we become convinced it must be true. In the process we ignore or minimize any evidence to the contrary. In fact, the strong feelings we have comes from a very powerful **hot thought** that automatically affects us. Our **hot thoughts** are so much a part of us they guide us without our ever examining whether they are really true.

5) **Labeling**: You put a fixed, global label on yourself or others without considering that the evidence might more reasonably lead to a less disastrous conclusion. This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing a mistake or a negative event we use highly loaded emotional language and names to portray ourselves or others.

6) **Mental filter**: (also called selective abstraction): You pay undue attention to one negative detail instead of seeing the whole picture. You dwell so completely on the detail that it becomes your reality.

7) **Mind reading**: You believe you know what others are thinking, failing to consider other, more likely possibilities. Your conclusion is that someone is reacting negatively to you and don’t bother to check it out.

8) **Fortune Teller Error**: You are so convinced that something will turn out badly that you react as though your prediction had already come true. You expect to be disappointed and act accordingly, thereby increasing the likelihood that your prediction will come true.

9) **Overgeneralization**: You make a sweeping negative conclusion that goes far beyond the current situation. You have the ability to see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat reaching back into the past and stretching out into the future.

10) **Personalization**: You believe others are behaving negatively because of you, without considering more plausible or possible explanations for their behaviour. The worst possible interpretations of situations are headline truths in your daily life.

11) **“Should” and “must” statements** (also called

imperatives): You have a precise, fixed idea of how you or others should behave and you overestimate how bad it is that these expectations are not met. You use your ‘shoulds’ and ‘shouldn’ts’ to motivate yourself and when you don’t measure up you often go overboard with feeling guilty. Your ‘shoulds’ and ‘shouldn’ts’ become the **‘musts’ and ‘oughts’** you hold others to. When others don’t measure up you often go overboard with anger, irritation and resentment. — All-in-all, it can make for a tough way to relate to yourself and others. Another hard day at the office.

12) **Tunnel vision**: An extreme version of the mental filter where you only see the negative aspects of a situation.

*Taken from the works of:

1. DAVID D. BURNS, M.D., **FEELING GOOD: THE NEW MOOD THERAPY**
2. JUDITH S. BECK, PH.D., **COGNITIVE THERAPY: BASICS AND BEYOND**
3. DENNIS GREENBERGER, PH.D., AND CHRISTINE A. PADESKY, PH.D., **MIND OVER MOOD: CHANGE HOW YOU FEEL BY CHANGING THE WAY YOU THINK**

Next months’ issue of **SOURCE LINES** will take a look at specific strategies for “un-twisting” our thinking. In the meantime here is one little story about “letting go”. Letting go or moving on is a simple but sometimes so difficult to achieve antidote to uselessly dwelling on a negative event or situation.

As two monks were walking down the road they noticed a young woman waiting to cross a stream. One of the monks, to the dismay of the other, went over to the woman, picked her up, and carried her across the water. About a mile down the road, the monk who was aghast at his friend’s action remarked, “We are celibate, we are not supposed to even look at a woman, let alone pick one up and carry her across a stream. How could you possibly do that? The monk replied, “I put her down a mile back. Are you still carrying her around with you?”

The Healing Power of Humor, Allen Klein

If you would like to have a confidential discussion with a counsellor about your own special “thinking twists” please don’t hesitate to contact Source Line.

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