

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

Our thoughts shape our day-to-day experiences and our understanding of who we are as individuals. This is great when we are coping well, performing highly and feeling good, but what happens when our thoughts are unhelpful? What happens when we get stuck in negative ways of viewing our world, or understanding our life? Muscles are strengthened by using them and similarly thinking habits are formed and reinforced by consistent practice. We sometimes become aware of styles of thinking of our students which are not always helpful for them. We thought it might be helpful to highlight the well documented unhelpful thinking styles so that you might also tune into them, label them and raise awareness of their unhelpfulness if you notice them in your children.

Do any of these remind you of the way you or your child thinks and responds when faced with a dilemma or conflict? Help your child to recognise unhelpful thinking styles, sometimes known as thinking errors. Here are some common ones:

Mind Reading

This is assuming we know what others are thinking (including about us). This is usually just bad guessing. It is when we decide in our mind what others are thinking, without checking the facts and then we act on that assumption. We simply cannot know what other people are thinking without them telling us. If your child is “reading the mind” of someone else ask them, ‘What is the evidence of their mind reading? How do you know?’

Mental Filtering

This is when we only notice what the filter wants or allows us to notice, and we dismiss anything that does not fit. Filtering out the positives can be a result of this kind of thinking. It pays to ask, ‘Am I only noticing the bad stuff?’

Predicting or Fortune Telling

This is when we believe we know what will happen in the future. It is often predicting that things will turn out badly, even if there is absolutely no proof that this is likely. This kind of thinking can lead to real problems because if we think things are going to go wrong, then we may act in a way that allows them to go wrong. Ask your child, ‘How likely on a scale of 0-10, where 0 is very unlikely is it that your prediction will come true?’

Black and White Thinking

Believing that something or someone can be only good or bad, right or wrong, rather than anything in between (shades of grey) can be called black and white thinking. Seeing the shades of grey is a skill which helps us see a situation realistically. Again, you can scale this question if your child is thinking in this way and make 0 white and 10 black. Ask them which number they would assign to the particular situation which is causing black and white thinking.

Magnifying

Exaggerating the risk of danger, or the negatives; minimising the odds of how things are most likely to turn out, or minimising positives. This is when we make one little mistake and

then we allow it to colour our day; some might say, 'blowing things out of proportion' or 'making mountains out of molehills'.

Shoulds and Musts

Thinking or saying, 'I should' and 'I must' puts pressure on ourselves and sets up unrealistic expectations. Help your child change their language from should, shouldn't, must and mustn't.

Catastrophising

This is when we make extreme judgements and imagine the very worst outcomes will occur, even if there isn't a scrap of evidence they will. Catastrophising is imagining the very worst will occur. You might say to your child, 'OK, thinking the worst possible this will definitely happen isn't helpful right now. What is most likely to happen?'

Memories

Current situations and events can trigger upsetting memories, leading us to believe that the danger is here and now, rather than in the past. If your child is going down this path you might say something like, 'This is just a reminder of the past. That was then and this is now. Even though the memory is making you feel upset, it is not actually happening again right now.'

Once you are able to help your child to identify and label any negative thoughts you are then able to help them to test the accuracy of the thinking and change the negative thinking to more positive thinking.

For more information:

https://psychologytools.com/worksheets/free/english_us/unhelpful_thinking_styles_free_en-us.pdf

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1sFKg_xl-o

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