



## Common unhelpful thinking habits / irrational

**cognitions:** modern psychotherapy tells us that **when stress becomes a disorder it causes a shift in thinking** – and we filter and process situations and events through a distorted and gloomy lens. The 'picture' is off track, and **it is not the situation that is causing our upset, it is our judgement of the situation** (to paraphrase the philosopher Epictetus).

The following are the most common thinking patterns people with anxiety and depression develop. *Note:* all of us do some of these some of the time, but when we adopt many of them as our natural default position, we have a problem. **Can you see yourself here?** If you can, don't worry, that's a good thing! It means you have the ability to self critique, and that if you

put the work in, you can dismantle those habits and build new ones using rational thinking skills with CBT.

### The FORTUNE TELLING habit:



**This is when we have a habit of predicting negative outcomes for situations and events:**

*'I'm not dating that person, it would never work out'. 'I'll go but I won't enjoy myself'. 'That won't work out, so here's no point in trying'. 'I wouldn't be able for that. Maybe in a few weeks or a few months'. 'I'll always be alone'. 'Nothing ever works out for me'.*

We think that we are anticipating and problem solving when we do this, saving ourselves from pointless effort or hurt or disappointment – but actually **WE DO NOT HAVE FORTUNE TELLING SKILLS**, so these *absolute* statements and beliefs, this self talk, cannot be trusted – believing these thoughts will cause self sabotaging behaviour (especially avoidant behaviour), and will stop us having a stimulating life where we take risks and see opportunities and excitement and live in the moment – rather than viewing everything as a negative and a hazard to be avoided.

Consider: if you were loved up and really happy in life would you have this kind of thinking habit? No, you would be viewing life through a different lens. So, it isn't 'life', it's your view of it. Is there any evidence for your thought and belief? Is there any evidence against it? What are the facts?

Build awareness of your thoughts, and examine and challenge them. **Review, reappraise and reframe.** Changing how you think changes how you feel which changes how you behave....

Give an example of how you might use this habit:

# The MIND READING habit:



*'He thinks I'm an idiot'. 'She wants the boss to hate me'. 'My husband thinks I'm disgusting'. 'She's a bitch, she did that out of spite and jealousy'. 'The interviewer thought I was spoofing'.*

If you were confident and happy would you have this kind of habit where you constantly ascribe negative thoughts and traits to people?

**WE DO NOT HAVE MIND READING SKILLS.** Those are your thoughts, not theirs. Those are your assumptions – and they cannot be relied upon when we have an emotional health disorder and we're filtering life through the negative lens. Thought stop and reframe.

Give an example of how you might use this habit:

# The EMOTIONAL REASONING habit:



*'I feel bad, therefore it is bad'. 'I feel angry therefore there is a reason to be angry'.*

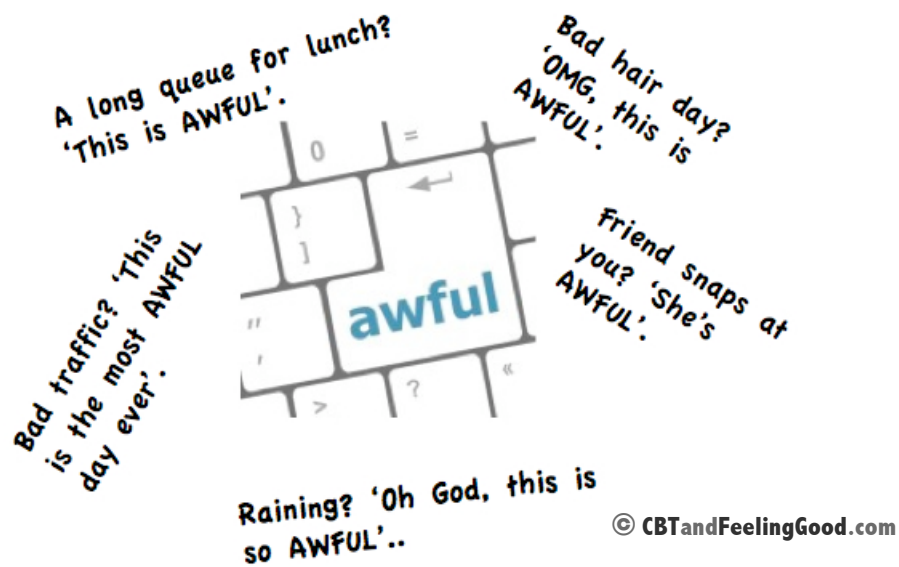
Actually, no, **FEELINGS ARE NOT FACTS**. This is hugely important in understanding and managing your emotional health when you're overly upset often, and have a pattern of self sabotaging behaviours.

Human beings have a primal '**fight or flight**' physiological response to stress and fear – releasing the stress hormones Adrenaline and Cortisol, which pump up our body to handle a physical threat or predator, even though today's threats are mostly psychological. This means our stress response to situations is not just emotional, it's literally physical too – symptoms of fight or flight include a racing heart, too much oxygen, the digestive system and immune system shutting down, veins dilating and causing blushing, the body sweating to cool itself down, and shaking and spacing out from an oxygen and adrenaline stimulus. Physical pumping up would be very handy to fight or run from a tiger, but it's very unhelpful as we try to go about the business of everyday life isn't it? If we have anxiety or depression, even low to moderate, we are hardwired for fear - and for many of us our systems can simmer in fight or flight mode inappropriately on and off throughout each day, with us not knowing what it is, just feeling shaky and not right. In extreme anxiety these symptoms escalate to actual panic attacks.

Accepting the above means that if we use '**emotional reasoning**', if we depend on how we 'feel' to interpret situations, we will misinterpret what's going on. Adopt CBT coping skills. Build awareness of your *thinking* and *feeling* (both emotional and physical) and *behaving*. Examine it. Understand and accept your body and your primal condition. When you feel shaky and upset: pause, practice deep breathing to regulate your overload of oxygen, consider the facts of the situation, and reappraise and reframe with new self talk. Tell yourself '*There is no tiger.*' You have an anxiety disorder, your body is exercising its design flaw when it interprets something as a danger or hazard. It is what it is. You can handle it. **CHANGE YOUR MIND, CHANGE YOUR MOOD.**

Give an example of how you might use this habit:

## The AWFULISING habit:



*A long queue for lunch? 'This is AWFUL'. Bad hair day? 'OMG, this is AWFUL'. Friend snaps at you? 'She's AWFUL'.*

The way we talk to ourselves, **our self talk**, about situations and the world, the meaning and significance we attach to events, causes our physical and behavioural responses. We develop a habit of making mountains out of molehills when we use extreme language in response to pretty benign events – and when we believe and trust this 'self talk' – it turns on fight or flight, and starts a self fulfilling prophecy of a vicious circle that feeds itself. (Include other self talk like 'I can't cope' and 'I can't bear this' in this habit.)

This language just serves to maximise your discomfort. It is possible to challenge and change this habit, and to develop a new habit of using less incendiary and more appropriate rational words to describe events:

*'I'm saying everyday nuisance things that happen are 'awful' again, this is just a bad habit that makes me overly upset, it's more true to say that this is an annoying inconvenience. but it is what it is and I'll accept and deal with it'.  
'Ah now, I'm saying I can't cope again. That's silly and just makes things harder. It's more true to say I can cope, but I'm not coping well, and would prefer it if I didn't have to cope. I'll be okay, it'll be okay.'*

Give an example of how you might use this habit:

## The MUST AND SHOULD habit:



(also known as musterbation {really}, and 'demand thinking', and inflexible 'rules for living')  
*'I want therefore I must have'.*

*'I must be thoroughly competent at all times, or else I am incompetent'*

*'You must behave as I think you ought to, and you must treat me with respect and thoughtfulness, or you are a bad rotten person'*

*'Things and conditions must be as I want them to be, and must never be too difficult or frustrating, or life is awful.'*

Albert Ellis explains this as "The idea that it is horrible when things are not the way we like them to be... .. instead of the idea that it is too bad, that we had better try to change or control bad conditions so that they become more satisfactory, and, if that is not possible, we had better temporarily accept and gracefully lump their existence."

Reframe and **CHANGE MUSTS TO PREFERENCES**, because they are illogical (who made us a God of the world? Where is it written in the stones or stars that you can control the random world or the thoughts and behaviours of others?).

*'I would prefer it if I were perfect and successful in all things, but I accept that I am exactly where I am at this moment, and that I'm a flawed human being that's just doing my best. I will make changes where I can.'*

*'I would prefer it if you behaved as I'd like you to behave, but I don't demand it and I accept that you choose your behaviour because of your thoughts and beliefs and feelings, and that you are governed by your own priorities.'*

Give an example of how you might use this habit:

## The BLACK AND WHITE habit:



(also known as 'all or nothing thinking' and the 'either / or fallacy')

This is when we think in absolutes. Things or people are:  
Lovely or awful. . Clever or stupid. Attractive or unattractive. Nice or horrible. Skinny or fat. Happy or miserable.  
Successful or a loser. Cool or a nerd. Authentic or fake.

('Always' and 'Never' feature in black and white self talk too. *'Things always go wrong', 'I'll never be truly happy', 'she's always late', 'he's never going to grow up'....*)

Things are never really an either/or. There are a whole spectrum of grays between extremes, but this habit does not account for that. Change the habit by monitoring your self talk, and by 'thought stopping' and reframing with new healthy realistic language instead:

*'I'm doing my black and white habit here saying she's a horrible person and that I'll never speak to her again because she didn't behave as I expected her to - but it's more true to say that I'm sad and disappointed, that I think she's thoughtless'.*

*'It's silly to say my colleague is evil - it's more true to say that we don't get on. and that I don't understand him and disapprove of some of his behaviour.'*

Give an example of how you might use this habit: