

Automatic thoughts

Dichotomising

Dichotomising implies that existence is regarded in terms of extremes – either or – black or white – without nuances. Individuals who are ruled by this type of thinking are very categorical in their judgements. In their view, an achievement is either a complete success or a total failure. The categorical judgements are also applied to humankind, which is subdivided into “winners “ vs. “losers”, “thoroughly good people” vs. “ thoroughly bad people” etc

Musturbation

This type of thinking implies that one’s existence is governed by imperative rules concerning what should be done and how. Musturbation is characterised by sentences containing the words “must” and “should”, such as:” It would be nice to go on a pick-nick, but I really must clean the oven” or “ I should not be watching television before I’ve done the dishes”.

Selective abstraction

This kind of automatic thoughts directs one’s attention to the gloomy aspects of life. Selective abstraction is like wearing a pair of dark glasses. Everything one sees appears dark and depressing. By focussing selectively on the negative aspects of life, one tends to remember unpleasant incidents and to dismiss the pleasant ones. One part of a context is noticed at the expense of the whole.

Disqualifying

This type of thinking implies that one turns something positive into something negative or unimportant. Successful achievements are explained in terms of “luck” or “chance”, rather than due to one’s own ability. The salesman who got a bonus for his selling rates disqualified the reward by saying:” It was sheer luck. I’ve never done so well before and I’ll never do it in the future. Besides, there are so many salesmen who do much, much better than I have done, so there is really nothing to be happy about.”

Magnifying

By magnifying, one notices something unpleasant and blows it up in an exaggerated way. Forgetting a colleague’s name or making some other minor social blunder becomes an

“unforgivable mistake”. Magnifying is frequently applied to ones own mistakes, as well as to those made by others.

Personalization

Personalization means that one takes exaggerated responsibility for other people’s feelings and behaviours. If somebody seems to be in a bad mood, the personalizer immediately believes that he/she has done something wrong to cause the other persons grumpiness. If people laugh in the street, the personalizer believes that they are laughing at him/her.

Telepathy

According to current knowledge, people are equipped with five senses. Some, however, behave as if they had a sixth – telepathy. We commit telepathy when we believe we know what people think or why they behave in a certain way. The imaginary ability to read other people’s minds can make us quite sure that others are selfish liars who dislike us and intend to use us for their purposes. A usual consequence of incorrect telepathy is isolation. We withdraw from others believing that they do not like us. Alternatively, we can choose to “clear the air” by starting an argument. This can lead to a number of embarrassing situations.

Prophecies

If telepathy is the imaginary sixth sense, the ability to make prophecies is the seventh. By prophecies we mean the tendency to presuppose that a certain future event will turn out in a negative way. For instance, a patient on sickleave may turn down an invitation to a party by thinking: “It’s no use going to that party. There will be too many people asking me all sorts of embarrassing questions about how I feel and what I do.” But what do we know about the future?

Catastrophising

Catastrophising is a more extreme version of magnifying and prophecies and implies that ordinary situations are transformed into questions about life and death. A headache is appraised in terms of a brain tumour. When the children are ten minutes late the catastrophising parent “knows” that they have been kidnapped etc.

Overgeneralization

This set of automatic thoughts refers to the tendency to regard isolated incidents as typical for one's life as a whole. A single unpleasant event leads to the expectation that the same kind of unpleasantness will repeat itself over and over again. If you fail in a certain situation you may label yourself as "stupid" or "worthless" and avoid similar situations in the future. If somebody has disappointed you in a particular instance, you may refuse to have anything to do with that person at all. Overgeneralization is often used in such a way that particular individuals are perceived as typical representatives of whole groups. Racism and prejudice against particular groups are based on overgeneralization.

Emotional thinking

This thinking implies the tendency to mix up feelings and facts, i.e. emotions are erroneously believed to be the truth about ourselves. If a person feels sad, she may believe that she is an altogether tragic character. Alternatively, she may think: "Since I feel sad, somebody or something must have hurt me". One reason for committing this cognitive error is that strong emotions are very convincing and make us disregard the evidence against them.