Effective Thinking: Shifting and Expanding Interpretations of Events

An interpretation is simply an internal behavior that determines the meaning of an event, and meaning depends on perspective. No interpretation can be the absolute truth. Note the following types of interpretations with suggestions on how to dialectically shift them:

Black and White Interpretations (Either/or, All- or-Nothing Thinking): Language that signals this interpretation includes always, never, every, and all the time, among others. Black and white interpretations rarely see the whole picture. These interpretations lead to rigidity and inflexibility, the opposite of a dialectical orientation. **Dialectical Shift:** If your interpretations seem extreme, think of opposite thoughts or beliefs, and then identify middle-ground ways of thinking. You may not believe the opposite thoughts or beliefs, but the intention is to practice flexibility in your interpretations.

Regret Orientation (Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda Thinking; or Hindsight Bias): "hindsight is 20/20." This means past choices seem clear with the benefit of knowing all of the outcomes now. Regret orientation keeps us stuck in the past, rather than focusing on what we can do effectively right now. **Dialectical Shift:** Rather than fixating on past mistakes, focus on what you can do to be effective in the present moment.

Mind-Reading: An interpretation you already know how others are thinking or feeling leads you to feel or act in a certain manner. **Dialectical Shift:** When you catch yourself mind-reading, check out your assumptions with other people, especially the person whose mind you are trying to read. The only way to know is to ask.

Minimization: Minimization happens when something large or significant is reduced to something very small. Sometimes this reduces the emotional impact of a situation (in the short-term), but the result is emotional invalidation. **Dialectical Shift:** Observe and describe the situation accurately without adding or subtracting, validating your feelings.

Magnification: Magnification is the opposite of minimization. It happens when something is small or insignificant and is exaggerated into something very large. It is similar to looking at a kitten through a magnifying glass and seeing a tiger. **Dialectical Shift:** Like with minimization, observe and describe the situation accurately without adding or subtracting.

Catastrophizing: Catastrophizing is an extreme form of magnification. It involves taking a situation and continuing to build on it and build on it in your mind into a calamity with dire consequences. **Dialectical Shift:** Focus on the one situation or problem at hand without exaggerating it. Most situations do not end up with extreme and dire consequences, so take one thing at a time. Alternatively, purposefully catastrophize to the point of absurdity to break you out of this interpretation.

Fortune-Telling (Crystal Ball Gazing): Fortune-telling interprets the future in negative ways, assuming you already know what is going to happen. **Dialectical Shift:** Rather than let a negative prediction of the future paralyze you, focus on what you can do effectively right now to cope with your situation or problem. Stay in the present moment.

Overgeneralization: Overgeneralization involves taking a small bit of information and applying it broadly across all kinds of different people and situations. **Dialectical Shift:** Do not assume your knowledge fits all people and all situations. Be open to not knowing all of the facts.

Selective Information Gathering (Selective Abstraction; Mental Filter; or Confirmation Bias): Sometimes you gather information that fits with your current thought or belief, ignoring evidence to the contrary. Some other interpretations may be omitted in this process. **Dialectical Shift:** Actively gather information and viewpoints that are different from your own. Remember you do not need to agree with these different perspectives, but they may lead you to greater flexibility and more options.

Labeling (Judging): Labeling reduces a person or situation to only a name. Labels fail to look at people and situations in a more holistic manner and miss important subtleties or nuances. **Dialectical Shift:** Let go of the urge to label a person or situation, as the world is usually more complex.

Personalization: Personalization makes it all about you. Frankly, most everything in the world is not about you. **Dialectical Shift:** Remember most of the time it is not about you. Take responsibility for what is yours and gently let go of the rest. Enjoy the ensuing freedom!

Emotion Mind "Reasoning": Emotion mind reasoning happens when emotion, and not reason, is the only filter for interpretations. Dialectical Shift: Use mindfulness to move to Wise Mind and then re- evaluate.

Should Statements: These statements focus on judgments rather than the realities of a particular situation or interaction. Reality unfolds in ways that do not fit our preferences (i.e., what "should" happen). **Dialectical Shift:** Focus on "what is," Stop "shoulding" on yourself and others.

Discounting Positives: Negatives and the downsides of situations blind you to positives. Minimizing or negating positives about yourself, others, situations, or the world is counterproductive. **Dialectical Shift:** Seek out positives, upsides, and silver linings for balance. Own the positives about yourself and give yourself credit. Seek the positives in people and situations that seem negative.

Blaming: Blaming makes everyone but you responsible for your problems and difficulties; blaming gives up your power and control and leaves you dependent on others to fix a situation or your life. **Dialectical Shift:** Someone or something else may be responsible for a problem, but your power and control comes from focusing on how you can influence situations and your life, if only through choosing how you respond.