2024

Wholeness counselling & Psychotherapy

Unhelpful thinking styles

How to spot them

Unhelpful thinking styles, often referred to as cognitive distortions, are patterns of thought that can lead to negative emotions and behaviours. Recognizing these styles can help improve mental health and emotional resilience. Here are some common unhelpful thinking styles and tips on how to spot them:

Common Unhelpful Thinking Styles

1. All-or-Nothing Thinking:

- Description: Viewing situations in black-and-white terms, with no middle ground.

- Signs: Thinking you are either a complete success or a total failure. For example, believing that if you don’t get an A, you are a failure.

2. Overgeneralization:

- Description: Making broad conclusions based on a single incident or limited evidence.

- Signs: Saying things like "I always mess up" or "Nothing ever goes right for me" after one setback.

3. Mental Filter:

- Description: Focusing solely on the negative aspects of a situation while ignoring the positive.

- Signs: Dwelling on a single criticism while dismissing multiple compliments.

4. Disqualifying the Positive:

- Description: Rejecting positive experiences by insisting they don’t count.

- Signs: Downplaying achievements or positive feedback, thinking "I only succeeded because I got lucky."

5. Jumping to Conclusions:

- Description: Making assumptions without evidence, often about what others are thinking or the outcome of a situation.

- Signs: Predicting negative outcomes or believing someone is judging you without any real evidence.

6. Catastrophizing:

- Description: Expecting the worst possible outcome in a situation.

- Signs: Thinking, "If I fail this exam, my life will be ruined," even if the stakes are relatively low.

7. Emotional Reasoning:

- Description: Believing that feelings reflect reality.

- Signs: Assuming that because you feel anxious, something bad is going to happen.

8. Should” Statements:

- Description: Imposing rigid rules on yourself or others.

- Signs: Thinking "I should be more productive" or "He shouldn’t have said that," leading to guilt or frustration.

9. Labelling and Mislabelling:

- Description: Assigning negative labels to yourself or others.

- Signs: Calling yourself "a loser" or labelling someone as "selfish" based on a single action.

10. Personalization:

- Description: Taking responsibility for events outside your control.

- Signs: Believing that you are the cause of someone else’s unhappiness or failure.

How to Spot Unhelpful Thinking Styles

1. Self-Monitoring: Keep a journal of your thoughts, especially during stressful situations. Note patterns that indicate unhelpful thinking.

2. Emotional Reactions: Pay attention to your emotional responses. If you frequently feel anxious, sad, or angry, reflect on your thoughts leading up to those feelings.

3. Challenging Thoughts: When you have a negative thought, ask yourself if it is based on facts or assumptions. Look for evidence that contradicts your thought.

4. Feedback from Others: Sometimes, friends or family can help identify when you are engaging in unhelpful thinking. Be open to their perspectives.

5. Cognitive Behavioural Techniques: Use techniques from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to identify and challenge cognitive distortions. This can include thought records or cognitive restructuring.

6. Mindfulness Practices: Engage in mindfulness exercises to increase awareness of your thoughts and feelings without judgment, helping you recognize patterns more clearly.

Conclusion

Recognizing unhelpful thinking styles is an important step toward improving mental health and emotional well-being. By identifying these patterns, you can work to challenge and change them, leading to a more balanced and positive outlook on life.