



# Thinking Traps to Avoid

## What is a thinking trap?

An internal thought process that convinces us of something, when in reality it's completely untrue. Usually these thoughts are possible outcomes at either extreme (really good or really bad) and prevent us from seeing all the possible outcomes in-between. These inaccurate thoughts block our ability to be resilient.

## Four Common Thinking Traps

**Mind Reading Thinking Trap** – Assuming you know what another person is thinking (often negative) or expecting another person to know what you are thinking.

- Negative effect: blocks communication because knowledge is assumed

How do you get out of this trap?

- Perspective-taking – take time to think of another perspective
- Ask instead of assume – ask another about their thoughts
- Communicate clearly and accurately – be aware of tone of voice

**Me OR Them Thinking Trap** – You believe you are the SOLE cause of every setback and problem OR you believe everyone else is the SOLE cause of problems. This thinking trap is having to have the blame lie *completely* on either yourself or *completely* on others.

- Negative effects of me thinking trap: likely leads to guilt and disappointment in yourself and feeling isolated and down.
- Negative effects of them thinking trap: leads to feeling anger and aggression

How do you get out of these traps?

- Perspective-taking – balance criticism of others and of yourself
- Ask questions – “What else could be true other than what I am thinking?”

**Helplessness Thinking Trap** – You believe that the negative event will impact all areas of your life and you have no control.

- Negative effects: passivity, giving up, depression, unmotivated, less energy

How do you get out of this trap?

- Ask yourself, “What would I tell others in this situation?”
- Check your predictions – Are they accurate?

**Catastrophizing Thinking Trap** – You ruminate on the irrational worst-case outcomes of a situation.

- Negative effects: Blocks you from taking action. Agitation, anxiety, inability to focus or physical effects like headaches, stomach aches, sweating, etc.

How do you get out of this trap?

- Reframe situation – “A more helpful way to see this is...”
- Plan – “If \_\_\_\_\_ happens, I will \_\_\_\_\_”

Modified from Karen Reivich, Definition and Demonstration of Thinking Traps at <https://www.coursera.org/lecture/positive-psychology-resilience/2-2-definition-and-demonstration-of-thinking-traps-INLcf>