



## Thinking Errors

Thinking Errors are a rather fascinating psychological theory which holds the view that every person manifests thinking errors (or cognitive distortions) to some degree and that these thinking errors are used to shape (or distort) the way we view, and act upon, situations/events in our life. Again, ***we all display thinking errors to some degree*** and the severity of these errors is viewed on a continuum. Many of us use thinking errors to justify such self-defeating behaviors as over-eating, smoking, lack of exercise, speeding, etc. These types of errors typically result in relatively lower levels of problems for us and don't always rise to the level of intervention. However, when thinking errors result in: hurting of others; depression; anxiety; obsessive/compulsive behaviors; problems at school or home; or dangerous behaviors, we need to address these distortions head-on.

Teenagers often have more extreme or obvious thinking errors because their brains are still forming, and they are still developing their "moral compasses". They are also biologically pre-disposed to experience situations with strong emotions which can make addressing or dealing with these thinking errors even more difficult. With that in mind, the time to discuss thinking errors with your child may not be when they are actively displaying them. You will probably need to wait until they are in a rational/calm mind-set.

In one of my weekly groups, we began to discuss thinking errors, and I was pleasantly surprised with how the group members took to the exercise. They all quickly identified their top one or two thinking errors and how it manifests in their lives. I am going to list what I consider to be the most common thinking errors for you to look at. Begin with identifying what thinking errors **you** typically fall back on. Then engage a conversation with your teen/pre-teen about what they think are their top thinking errors. You can also have fun and begin observing your fellow citizens and see if you can spot their thinking errors in situations which can bring them out – large gatherings, highly stressful or contentious events (sporting events), or even political discussions. 😊

## Listening to understand

In a class I teach to staff within the district, I talk about the idea of listening with the intent to understand. I also talk about how when I first started as a counselor, I used to joke with friends and family that I felt a little bit like a high-priced friend. However, the more I have watched people I have come to realize that most people do not know how to truly listen to others, and that most people listen to others with the intent to either respond back, to make a point, or to assert their will/wishes/desires. There is a place within relationships for each of these types of conversations; however, listening to someone with truly only wanting to hear them and understand what they are trying to convey is a ***very powerful tool***. Try to think of a time when you felt like someone really heard you and tried to understand your point of view? The healing and relationship building power of such an interaction is transformational.

In the next week, I challenge you to take the time each day to REALLY listen to your child. This can be facilitated by simply providing them with the prompt: "What were three things you did at school today?" In listening to your child you should:

- 1.) Focus on their words.
- 2.) Try to listen for the underlying feelings he/she is expressing.
- 3.) Don't interrupt.
- 4.) Ask follow-up questions to learn more.
- 5.) Repeat back what you hear to show you understand.

You can also have your child practice this with you. Just reverse the roles and they should ask you three things you did today. Your child should work on demonstrating the same skills as listed above. If your child is younger, they may struggle with being able to identify underlying feelings so maybe you could talk to them about what you were feeling in the three examples to help model appropriate naming and expression of feelings. Give this a try and let us know how it goes. You may stumble at first, but keep after it...it's worth the effort.



- **Catastrophizing:** Blowing things out of proportion. Having a reaction that is bigger than the problem. Example: "If my boyfriend leaves me, I will never find true love and I will be alone forever." Or "If I fail this test I will never get into a good school and my life will be ruined."

Once your teen is calm, you can help them by asking them questions which challenge this error. Things like: "Is it possible other people have gone through a break-up and then gone on to find happiness with someone else?" or "Has every person who has failed an exam had their life ruined?" Remember, your teen doesn't have as much life experience as you so these feel like real or valid assumptions/conclusions to them.

- **All or Nothing Thinking (also called Black and White Thinking):** This is thinking in extremes. Your child may fail to see the grey area. They may make statements like: "I always make a fool of myself" or "I'm a screw up and always mess up."

Try to encourage your child to recall positive experiences. Encourage them to modify statements to "I can't" to "I can't, yet!" Ask them to try and remember a time when they did succeed or demonstrate the skill/behavior they are fixating on. Ask them if they would view a friend that way? Finally, work on creating a culture of acceptance in your home that is not linked to performance. Encourage your child to try and look at a situation from many different angles instead of just right or wrong/win or lose.

- **Minimizing:** This is just like it sounds. A person minimizes the impact an event or the impact of their actions/behavior/role in an event. This allows a person to minimize their accountability and responsibility. Examples may include: "I didn't push her that hard." "I didn't say as much as the other kids did."

You will need to hold your child accountable for their behavior. Focus on getting them to acknowledge their behavior by asking questions like "did you....?" Or "didn't you...?" You want to remove their ability to qualify their responses. Either you did it, or you did not do it.

- **Victim Mentality (Blaming Others):** Justifying behaviors by blaming someone else or some outside reason.

This is one of the most commonly used thinking errors – especially in adolescence. Teens are preoccupied with justice (or perceived injustice). Victim mentality allows the person to avoid admitting they made a mistake or that they are responsible.

### **(THINKING ERRORS CONTINUED)**

An example could include: "My teacher doesn't like me, and she is always calling me out in front of everyone so I swore at her."

Left unchecked, this thinking error can turn into someone who believes they are entitled or lack gratitude. You should confront the behavior by calling them out on their actions. "Are you saying it's your teacher's fault for you using profanity?" You will also need to develop appropriate consequences for their actions and hold them to these consequences.

- **Generalizing:** This is when a person takes a single negative event (or positive event) and uses that to form an overarching theory about how life works.

An example could be that your child gets in trouble with a teacher and concludes the teacher has it in for her and she will always not like her. Or your son gets turned down by a girl he is interested in and concludes that girls don't like him. Or your daughter who has a friend who uses prescription narcotics without any consequences so she assumes that she can also use without consequence.

You can challenge this type of thinking by challenging their conclusions. Ask your teen if every one would come to the same conclusion if presented with the same facts. Or again, ask them if they would have this same perspective or thoughts if a friend came to them with these situations.

- **Mind Reading:** Mind reading is coming to a conclusion about someone else's thoughts by interpreting their actions.

Because teenagers are very aware of what others are doing, or sensitive to what others think of them, they are more susceptible to committing this type of error. An example could be your teen waves to a friend on the other side of the street and gets no response from their friend so their conclusion is that the friend is mad at them. Or your son thinks you are angry at him because you walk into the house and don't say hello.

You can work on this thinking error by challenging your teen to think of alternative reasons for a situation. What else could account for the person's behavior?

