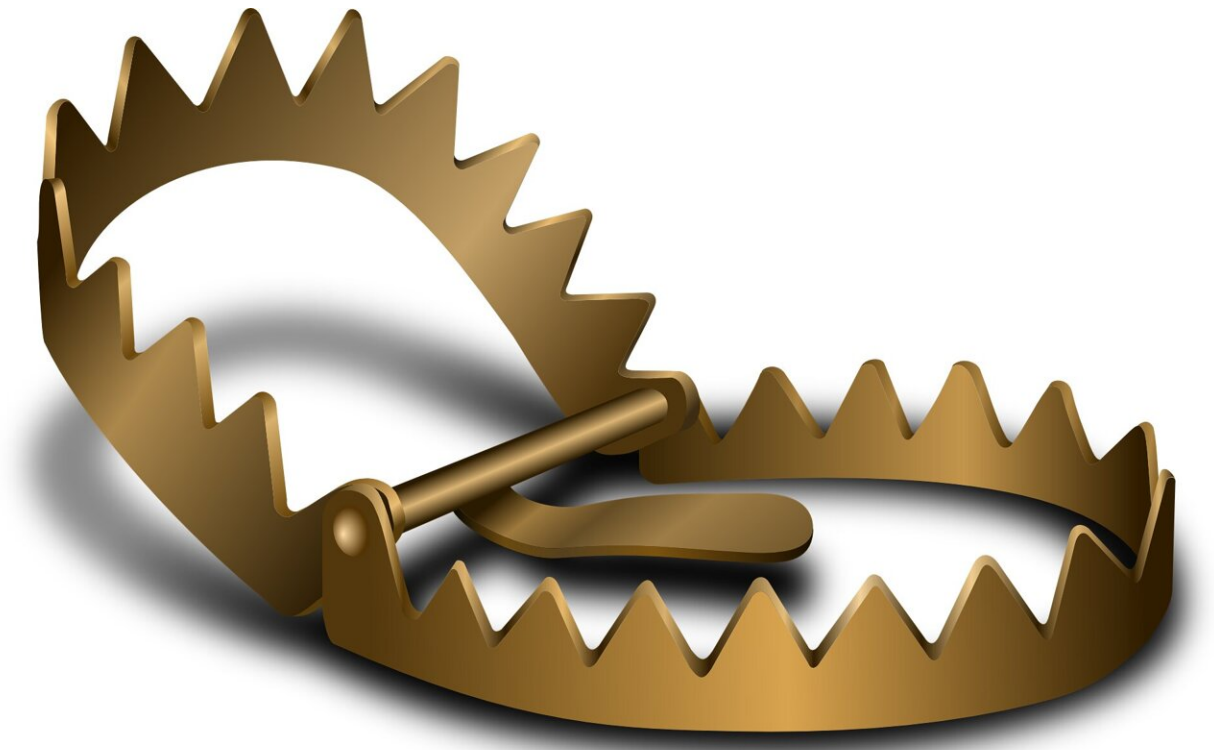


Five common thinking traps and how to avoid them

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Have you ever fallen into a thinking trap?

"I already messed up my plan by eating a piece of cake, so I might as well start my diet over again on Monday!"

"I have a really bad headache. Could this be a brain tumor?!"

"My co-worker never says hello when I pass her in the hallway. She must hate me!"

These thoughts are good examples of cognitive distortions—also known as "thinking [traps](#)." They can be easy to fall into and may not be rational. But irrational or not, thoughts affect how a person feels and how they ultimately behave, one expert says.

"There is a tendency to believe that thoughts are completely rational and true in the moment—when in reality, they are just thoughts," said Megan Hays, Ph.D., [clinical psychologist](#) and assistant professor in the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.

Hays says [cognitive behavioral therapy](#), first introduced by psychologist Aaron Beck in the 1960s, is a type of psychotherapy that proposes a person's mood and feelings are impacted by their thoughts and behaviors. One of the strategies of CBT is to identify and overcome cognitive distortions and replace them with new, more helpful thoughts.

Hays presents five thinking traps, which she identifies as common negative cognitive distortions, and offers examples of how to use CBT to avoid these traps.

Trap No. 1: All-or-nothing thinking

"This thinking style is often termed as black-and-white thinking and is one of the most common traps," Hays said. "It involves thinking in extremes, such as saying to yourself 'The presentation was either a total success or a complete failure' or 'I am either great at my job or I am horrible.'"

Hays says the antidote to this thinking trap is to be more flexible in the interpretation of the situation.

- **Example:** "I only have 20 minutes to exercise today, so I just won't work out at all since I don't have my usual hour."
- **Replace with:** "Something is always better than nothing. It is better to exercise for 20 minutes than not at all."

Trap No. 2: Catastrophizing

This thinking trap involves focusing on the worst possible outcome of a situation, and not on the most likely or probable outcome. The solution for catastrophizing is simple: De-catastrophizing.

"Once the [worst-case scenario](#) has been assessed, ask what the realistic odds are that the worst fear will come true," Hays said. "Then, look at other possible outcomes, and consider how to cope, even if the worst happened."

- **Example:** "I haven't heard from my partner in three hours—he could be dead!"
- **Replace with:** "He is probably just busy at work. There have been many times in the past that I worried when I didn't hear from him, but nothing horrible ever happened."

Trap No. 3: Emotional reasoning

This thinking trap involves seeing feelings or emotions as the truth, regardless of the objective evidence. Just because one feels useless does not mean they are.

How to break free of emotional reasoning? "Remember that feelings are not facts, and tap into logical reasoning skills by examining the objective evidence for and against the automatic negative thoughts," Hays said.

- **Example:** "I feel really anxious on this plane ride, so I think something bad is about to happen."
- **Replace with:** "Feelings are not facts. I have been on many plane rides in the past, and nothing bad has ever happened. The odds of being in a plane crash are less than one in 10 million. I can accept my feelings of anxiety without believing something awful will happen."

Trap No. 4: Mind reading

"Mind reading is assuming that someone is thinking something negative, without having any definitive evidence," Hays said. "This can often lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, when the other person picks up on your odd behavior."

Realize that no one can read minds and one can never really know what others are thinking unless they say it.

- **Example:** "My boss hasn't responded to my second email requesting information. She must think I am so annoying. I am probably her least favorite employee."
- **Replace with:** "She has been especially busy lately and is probably having to prioritize all of the items on her to-do list. I can think of many examples of times when my boss was very responsive to me in the past, and there is no reason to believe that she does not like me."

Trap No. 5: Overgeneralization

When encountering difficult situations, it is easy to fall victim to overgeneralizing when it is assumed that it is going to happen again every time, or that a single negative event is part of a series of unending negative events.

"If you find yourself thinking 'Why does this always happen to me?' or 'How typical—I'm just an unlucky person,' you may be caught up in the thinking trap of overgeneralization," Hays said.

"Overcome this trap by removing terms such as "always," "never," "everybody" and "nobody," and look for any exceptions to the statement.

- **Example:** "That date was horrible. I am a terrible dater who will never find love."
- **Replace with:** "I am probably overgeneralizing. I've been on some fun dates, so this doesn't happen every single time, and it's very possible that it won't happen next time either."

Hays says the bottom line is, by using cognitive behavioral therapy, one can transform their thoughts, and potentially change how they feel and how they ultimately behave, for the better.

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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