Common Mental Mistakes

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All or None Thinking: Seeing no middle ground. “A person is either ugly or good looking…” “A person is either dumb or intelligent…”

Overgeneralization: Unintentional exaggeration of the frequency of a situation or an inaccurate extrapolation. The two most often words used when people overgeneralize are always and never.

Mental Filter: The mistake of only seeing or acknowledging information that is consistent or “fits” with what you already think or believe. It’s like having blinders on.

Discounting the Positive: Believing that positive information (that is contrary to your current beliefs) somehow "doesn't count" as evidence that the situation is better than it seems. For example, as a person depresses himself, he tends to discount the positive in his life. If this continues, he might get to the point where he believes that nothing in life is good.

Jumping to Conclusions: Developing an opinion about something very quickly without gathering facts.

Magnification: Exaggerating the importance of a shortcoming or minimizing the importance of a good quality.

Emotional Reasoning (& Gut Thinking): Thinking in a certain manner that is heavily influenced by your current mood. For example, when a person is depressed about one thing, s/he is likely to think depressing thoughts about other things as well — thing about which s/he ordinarily would not think pessimistically.

Irrational Labeling: Assigning a name to someone or something and the name does not reflect or describe the person or object. For example, if a person labels himself "delinquent," he is likely to act out the part.

Personalization & Blame: Mistakenly assigning the cause of something to either yourself or someone else.
**Irrational Should Statements:** (1) Rigid, unbending rules that often have no evidence to support them. (2) Imply belief in magic.

**Confusing Needs with Wants:** Thinking that you "need" something when in fact you only "want" it. For example, absolute needs are those things we need in order to survive: air, food, water, sufficient warmth, sometimes medication.

**Confusing "Choosing To" with "Having To":** Not realizing that something is a choice rather than a necessity. Anytime people have the sincere impression that they are forced to do something they do not want to do, they resent it. The only time we are ever *forced* to do something is when we are physically overpowered and made to do against our will. Otherwise, when we do something, no matter how much we dislike doing it, we are choosing or deciding to do it.

**Can't Stand-itis:** Believe that you cannot withstand or tolerate something when you can.

**Catastrophizing:** Thinking something to be terrible, horrible, and/or awful, rather than it being simply “bad”. Automatically predicting the worst-case scenario: the headache is actually a brain tumor.

**Magical Worry:** Believing that somehow your worry keeps the feared event from occurring. After years of worrying about things only to have our worries not come true, sometimes we unintentionally make a connection -- we worry about things, they do not happen.

**Irrational Definitions:** Having a definition of something that is not based on fact and insisting that your definition is the only correct way to define it. For example, “If a man doesn’t spend all his time with me, he is selfish…”

**Confusing Relying with Depending:** To *rely* on someone is to trust they will do something that you could do yourself or that you could find other means of doing it. To *depend* on someone is to count on a person to do something that you cannot do yourself or find other means of having it done.

**Confusing Inability with Unwillingness:** When a person is *unable* to do something, s/he does not have the skills, knowledge or attributes to do it. A person is *unwilling* to do something when s/he has the ability to do it, but chooses not to do it, and instead, chooses a different behavior.
Confusing Possibility with Probability: Usually in the form of taking a remote possibility and making it a distinct probability.

Projection: Assigning your own motives or thoughts to someone else, thinking that they must think like you do. For example, the teen who yells at his parents when they assign a consequence, in an attempt to give them a dose of what he's feeling so he doesn't have to feel it for himself.

Nonsense Arguments: Distracting yourself with an obvious statement of fact.

Irrational Hopelessness/Helplessness: Believing your idea that there is no solution to your problem. For example, "I know all there is to know about this problem. If I do not see a solution to it, one must not exist!"

Too Much/Too Little Problem: Believing that the amount of something is responsible for some undesired condition/situation. For example, "I'm too fat!" or "I'm too skinny!" The implication is that I will not be able to reach a goal as a result of how much fat I have, or because I don't have enough weight.

Ambivalent Beliefs: Beliefs that a person believes strongly enough to feel bad about not acting on them, but not strongly enough to act on them. They are usually moralistic. For example, premarital sex.