

5 Thinking Traps and How to Escape Them

I know what you're thinking. At least I assume I do when I fall into the thinking trap of mindreading. And you're just as guilty of mindreading. We all are.

That constant voice in our heads creates thoughts that drive our emotions, our behaviors, and our physiology. And when that happens, we can't think straight. We fall into thinking traps that prevent us from seeing a situation as it truly is and instead we see the situation through our old habits and beliefs. When the judge tells you to approach the bench, what goes through your mind? When your spouse/partner sends you a message that says you need to talk when you get home, how do you react? If your answer is anything more than curiosity and suspending judgment until you hear what they have to say, then chances are you've fallen into a thinking trap.

Five of the most common thinking traps are: (1) Mindreading, (2) Me, (3) Them, (4) Catastrophizing, and (5) Helplessness.

MINDREADING is when you assume you know what another person is thinking or assume they know what you're thinking. The effect of mindreading is that it blocks communication. When you think you know what someone is thinking, you don't ask them questions. Why would you? You already know what they're thinking. So when your friend says they'll meet you at Starbucks and you respond "okay"—assuming you know which Starbucks they're thinking of—don't be surprised when you end up in different locations.

The **ME** thinking trap is when you believe you're the sole cause of every setback and problem. It's all your fault. The effect of the ME trap is a repeated pattern of experiencing guilt and sadness.

The **THEM** thinking trap is when you believe that other people or circumstances are the sole cause of your setbacks and challenges. Effects of the THEM trap are anger, frustration, and aggression towards those you blame for your problems.

CATASTROPHIZING is when you start telling yourself stories about every possible worst-case outcome. You irrationally overestimate the threat while severely underestimating your ability to cope. Effects of catastrophizing are anxiety, distraction, agitation, lack of focus, headaches, and not engaging in a productive way.

HELPLESSNESS is when you believe the negative event is permanent and pervasive across all areas of your life, and that you have no control. You believe bad things are here to stay and that there's nothing you can do about it. Effects of helplessness are feelings of hopelessness, depression, feeling drained and depleted, and lack of motivation—you have no energy to do anything, and you become passive.

Do you recognize any of these thinking traps? Which do you fall into most often? For me, it's been mindreading. The good news is there's a way to escape. Dr. Karen Reivich, the Director of Resilience and Positive Psychology Training Programs at the University of Pennsylvania, developed a skill called "Real-Time Resilience" that you can use to escape from a thinking trap.

The skill of "Real-Time Resilience" is to challenge the thought/thinking trap in real-time as you hear the mental chatter. Dr. Reivich provides three strategies and short phrases to help you talk yourself out of the thinking trap. The first is using specific and detailed evidence to prove to yourself why your initial thought is not true. Create a big, bright, vivid picture of the evidence in your mind to crowd out the

counterproductive thought. Use the sentence starter, “That’s not true because _____” to prime your mind to start the flow of evidence.

The second is reframing the counterproductive thought strategically using optimism when you need it. The sentence starter here is “A more helpful way to see this is _____” or “A better way to see this is _____.” Then go on a rant about all the ways you can see the situation in a helpful or better way.

The third is having a plan. This strategy is particularly effective when you’re stuck in the catastrophizing thinking trap. Tell yourself, “If x happens, I will y.” By developing a contingency plan, you escape the thinking trap and relieve your anxiety.

Now it’s your turn to use “Real-Time Resilience.” Pick a current or upcoming stressful situation where you need to perform at your best. Make a list of 5 counterproductive thoughts you might have in that situation. Then for each counterproductive thought use one of the strategies above to generate a response. Remember to use the sentence starters. Good luck with your escape!