Common Unhelpful Thinking Traps

Sometimes we get caught in unhelpful thinking traps, such as these described below. We might notice we experience some more than others, there may be some that are all too familiar to you. Once you identify those unhelpful thinking traps, you can start to notice them (they very often occur before or during situations that can lead to unhelpful behaviours or during distressing situations). Once you notice them you can then learn to challenge or distance yourself from them; resulting in the increased likelihood of you being able to see the situation in a different, realistic, balanced and more helpful way.

All or nothing	Also known as 'black and white' thinking. Thinking something or someone can be only good or bad, right or wrong, rather than seeing the 'shades of grey'. "Either I do it right or not at all" "I will do this perfectly or I have completely failed" **Things aren't totally white or totally black. There are shades of grey. Where is this on the spectrum?**
Catastrophising	Also known as 'magnification'. This trap means you are likely to blow things out of proportion. Imaging or believing that the worst thing will happen. **Thinking that the worst possible things will definitely happen isn't helpful right now. What is most likely to happen?**
Critical Self	Being your own harshest critic, putting yourself down, self-criticism, blaming ourselves for events or situations that are not (totally) our responsibility. **I think that's the internal bully talking. Would most people who really know me say that about me? IS this something that I am totally responsible for?**
Compare and Despair	Seeing only the good and positive aspects in others and getting upset when comparing ourselves directly and negatively with them. **Am I comparing and despairing? What would be a more balanced and helpful way of looking at this?**
Disqualifying the Positives	Dismissing or discounting the good things you've done or that have happened to you for one reason or another. **Am I disqualifying the positives here? Let me take a moment to consider, recognise and accept the good.**
Emotional Reasoning	Assuming because we feel a certain way, that it must be true. "I feel bad, so it must be bad" "I feel anxious, so I must be in danger" "I feel embarrassed, so I must be an idiot" **Just because it feels bad, doesn't necessarily mean it is bad. My feelings are just a reaction to my thoughts and thoughts are just automatic brain**

	reflexes.
Judgements	Making evaluations or judgements about events, ourselves, others, or the world, rather than describing what we actually see and have evidence for. **I'm making an evaluation about the situation or person. It's how I make sense of the world, but that doesn't mean my judgements are always right or helpful. Is there another perspective?**
Labelling	Assigning labels to ourselves or other people. e.g. "I'm such a loser" "They're all idiots" "I'm completely useless" **What evidence do I have that suggests I/they are exactly that? Is this the case 100% of the time? Can my thinking be more flexible here?**
Mental Filter	When we notice or only pay attention to certain types of evidence or we only see what the filter allows us to see and we dismiss anything that doesn't 'fit' with the filter. For example noticing our failures but not acknowledging our successes. Like looking through dark blinkers or 'gloomy specs', or only catching the negative things in our 'kitchen strainers', whilst anything more positive or realistic is filtered out. **Am I only noticing the bad here? Am I filtering out the positives? Have I got my 'gloomy specs' on? What would be a more realistic way of thinking here?**
Memories	Current situations or events can trigger upsetting memories, leading in use thinking and believing that the danger is in the here and now, rather than in the past, causing us distress in the present moment. **This is just a reminder of the past. That was then, and this is now. Even though this memory makes me feel upset, it's not actually happening again right now.**
Mind Reading	Imaging we know what others are thinking (usually about ourselves). **Am I assuming I know what others are thinking? What's the evidence they think this way? Those are my own thoughts, not theirs. I only see the world as I am, not as they are. Is there a more balanced way of looking at this?**
Over-Generalisation	Seeing a pattern based on a single event, or being overly broad in the conclusions we draw. **Am I over-generalising? Am I thinking too broadly without looking at this in a balanced way?**
Prediction	Also known as 'fortune telling'. Believing we know what is going to happen in the future. **Am I thinking that I can predict the future? How likely is it that what I am thinking will really happen?**

Personalisation	Blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn't completely your fault. Conversely, blaming other people for something that was your fault. **Am I 100% responsible for this? If I was to create a pie-chart of responsibility and share out parts of this chart, would I take the whole pie-chart, or do other people share it with me? Am I blaming others for something I should be responsible for?**
Shoulds and Musts	Thinking or saying, 'I should' (or shouldn't) and 'I must' puts pressure on ourselves and sets up unrealistic expectations. Using these critical words can lead us to feeling guilty, or like we have already failed. If we apply 'shoulds' to other people, the result is often frustration. **Am I putting more pressure on myself? Setting expectations of myself that are unachievable? What would be more realistic?**