

Balanced Thinking



We tend to trust what goes on in our brains and generally, this is a good thing—our brain has been wired to alert us to danger and find solutions to the problems we encounter every day. However, there are some occasions when you may want to challenge what your brain is telling you. It's not that your brain is purposely lying to you, it's just that it may have developed some biases or non-helpful connections over time as part of your childhood development.

It can be surprisingly easy to create biased connections in the brain. Our brains are predisposed to making connections between thoughts, ideas, actions, and consequences, whether they are truly connected or not.

The first 1000 days of life, from conception and up to the age of your child being two, can be a period of many pressures, and that can make expectant and new mums (and their partners) particularly vulnerable to these thinking biases, causing psychological problems, such as anxiety and depression.

What are thinking biases?

They are biased perspectives we take on ourselves and the world around us. They are thoughts and beliefs, often developed as protective mechanisms during childhood, that we unknowingly reinforce over time.

These patterns and systems of thought are often subtle—it's difficult to recognise them when they are a regular feature of your day-to-day thoughts. That is why they can be so damaging since it's hard to change what you don't recognise as something that needs to change!

All thinking biases are:

- Tendencies or patterns of thinking or believing;
- That are biased, false or inaccurate;
- And have the potential to cause psychological damage.

These patterns have been shown to relate positively to symptoms of depression, and although they do not necessarily cause depression they can make the 'spiral of depression' deeper.

The list of recognised thinking biases are described below.

Addressing these biases: creating more balanced thinking

The therapy to address these biases is best done in partnership with a Counsellor. You can book an introductory online session on the website. Therapy would include a number of steps to develop more balanced thinking:

- Understanding the biases and recognising which one's you may be susceptible to.
- Looking back in your past to identify childhood patterns or schemas that may have been reinforced over time.
- How to heal these patterns, including being compassionate to yourself,
- And how to deal with them in the present.

1. Filtering



A person engaging in filter (or “mental filtering”) takes the negative details and magnifies those details while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation. For instance, a person may pick out a single, unpleasant detail, such as one aspect of their partner or child’s behaviour, and dwell on it exclusively so that their vision of reality becomes darkened or distorted. When a cognitive filter is applied, the person sees only the negative and ignores anything positive.

2. Polarised Thinking (or “Black and White” Thinking)



In polarised thinking, things are either “black-or-white” — all or nothing. We have to be perfect or we’re a complete and abject failures — there is no middle ground. For example, I have to be perfect to be thought of as a good mum! A person with polarised thinking places people or situations in “either/or” categories, with no shades of grey or allowing for the complexity of most people and most situations. A person with black-and-white thinking sees things only in extremes.

3. Overgeneralisation



In this bias, a person comes to a general conclusion based on a single incident or a single piece of evidence. If something bad happens just once, they expect it to happen over and over again. A person may see a single, unpleasant event as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat.

For instance, if a mum makes one mistake with their child, they conclude that they are a bad mother and need help.

4. Jumping to Conclusions



Without individuals saying so, a person who jumps to conclusions feels that they know what another person is feeling and thinking — and exactly why they act the way they do. In particular, a person is able to determine how others are feeling toward the person, e.g. perhaps another mother, as though they could read their mind. Jumping to conclusions can also manifest itself as fortune-telling, where a person believes their entire future is pre-ordained.

Another example is when a person may conclude that someone is holding a grudge against them, but doesn’t actually bother to find out if they are correct. Another example involving fortune-telling is when a person may anticipate that things will turn out badly e.g. I am going to be a useless mother, and will feel convinced that their prediction is already an established fact, so why bother trying, or if my child doesn’t sleep well in the first few weeks, it’s always going to be like this.

5. Catastrophising



When a person engages in catastrophising, they expect disaster to strike, no matter what. This is also referred to as *magnifying*, and can also come out in its opposite behavior, minimizing. In this bias, a person hears about a problem and uses *what if* questions (e.g., “What if tragedy strikes?” “What if it happens to me?”) to imagine the absolute worst occurring. This can lead to significant anxiety, worrying about the future (often called ruminating). For example, my baby’s not feeding well.. she’s never going to feed well,... and will not develop properly,... so will be last in class at everything,... and never have any friends, etc. etc.

6. Personalisation



Personalisation is a bias where a person believes that everything others do or say is some kind of direct, personal reaction to them. They literally take virtually everything personally, even when something is not meant in that way. A person who experiences this kind of thinking will also compare themselves to others, trying to determine who is smarter, better looking, etc.

A person engaging in personalisation may also see themselves as the cause of some unhealthy external event that they were not responsible for. For example, “We were late to the dinner party and *caused* everyone to have a terrible time. If I had only pushed my husband to leave on time, this wouldn’t have happened.”

7. Control Fallacies



This bias involves two different but related beliefs about being in complete control of every situation in a person’s life. In the first, if we feel *externally controlled*, we see ourselves as helpless a victim of fate. For example, “I can’t help it if the quality of the work is poor, my boss demanded I work overtime on it.”

The fallacy of *internal control* has us assuming responsibility for the pain and happiness of everyone around us. For example, “Why aren’t you happy? Is it because of something I did?”

8. Fallacy of Fairness



In the fallacy of fairness, a person feels resentful because they think that they know what is fair, but other people won’t agree with them. As our parents tell us when we’re growing up and something doesn’t go our way, “Life isn’t always fair.” People who go through life applying a measuring ruler against every situation judging its “fairness” will often feel resentful, angry, and even hopelessness because of it. Because life isn’t fair — things will not always work out in a person’s favour, even when they should.

9. Blaming



When a person engages in blaming, they hold other people responsible for their emotional pain. They may also take the opposite track and instead blame themselves for every problem — even those clearly outside their own control.

For example, “Stop making me feel bad about myself!” Nobody can “make” us feel any particular way — only we have control over our own emotions and emotional reactions.

10. Shoulds and Musts



Should statements (“I should pick up after myself more...”) appear as a list of ironclad rules about how every person should behave. People who break the rules make a person following these should statements angry. They also feel guilty when they violate their own rules. A person may often believe they are trying to motivate themselves with shoulds and shouldn’ts, as if they have to be punished before they can do anything.

For example, “I really must exercise. I shouldn’t be so lazy.” *Musts* and *oughts* are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When a person directs *should statements* toward others, they often feel anger, frustration and resentment.

11. Emotional Reasoning



The bias of emotional reasoning can be summed up by the statement, “If I feel that way, it must be true.” Whatever a person is feeling is believed to be true automatically and unconditionally. If a person feels stupid and boring, then they must be stupid and boring.

Emotions are extremely strong in people, and can overrule our rational thoughts and reasoning.

Emotional reasoning is when a person’s emotions takes over our thinking entirely, blotting out all rationality and logic. The person who engages in emotional reasoning assumes that their unhealthy emotions reflect the way things really are — “I feel it, therefore it must be true.” When hormones change in pregnancy and motherhood this can be a common bias.

12. Fallacy of Change



In the fallacy of change, a person expects that other people will change to suit them if they just pressure or cajole them enough. A person needs to change people because their hopes for success and happiness seem to depend entirely on them.

This bias is often found in thinking around relationships. For example, a girlfriend who tries to get her boyfriend to improve his appearance and manners, in the belief that this boyfriend is perfect in every other way and will make them happy if they only changed these few minor things.

13. Global Labeling



In global labeling (also referred to as mislabeling), a person generalises one or two qualities into a negative global judgment about themselves or another person. This is an extreme form of overgeneralising. Instead of describing an error in context of a specific situation, a person will attach an unhealthy universal label to themselves or others.

For example, they may say, “I’m a really bad mother” in a situation where they failed at a specific task. When someone else’s behavior rubs a person up the wrong way — without bothering to understand any context around why — they may attach an unhealthy label to him, such as “He’s a real jerk.”

Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded. For example, instead of saying someone drops her children off at nursery every day, a person who is mislabeling might say that “She abandons her children to strangers.”

14. Always Being Right



When a person engages in this bias, they are continually putting other people on trial to prove that their own opinions and actions are the absolute correct ones. To a person engaging in “always being right,” being wrong is unthinkable — they will go to any length to demonstrate their rightness.

For example, “I don’t care how badly arguing with me makes you feel, I’m going to win this argument no matter what because I’m right.”

Being right often is more important than the feelings of others around a person who engages in this bias, even loved ones.

15. Heaven’s Reward Fallacy



The final bias is the false belief that a person’s sacrifice and self-denial will eventually pay off, as if some global force is keeping score. This is a riff on the fallacy of fairness, because in a fair world, the people who work the hardest will get the largest reward. A person who sacrifices and works hard but doesn’t experience the expected pay off will usually feel bitter when the reward doesn’t come.