

Unhelpful Thinking Styles and Theological Reflections

1. All-or-Nothing Thinking (AN):

You see things in black-and-white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.

Example: An example would be a straight-A student who received a B on an exam and concluded, "Now I'm a total failure."

A. Why is this thinking incorrect?

This type of thinking causes one to fear any mistake or imperfection because that is taken as an indication of being worthless. This way of evaluating things is unrealistic because life is rarely completely either one way or the other. For example, no one is absolutely brilliant or totally stupid. Nothing on earth is totally one way or the other. Rarely, does everyone always like us, or rarely do we always find the perfect solution.

B. Theological reflection

The idea that nothing on earth will ever be perfect, including people and their activities is certainly a common theme in the New Testament. Romans 3:23, for example, says that everyone has failed in some way, or to use the New Testament language, they have sinned. However, Romans 3:24 goes on to say that even though we are not OK, that is OK. In other words, we are accepted by God anyway, through His forgiveness. This theme is expressed in Romans 8:1: "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ." Romans 5:12 continues this theme and says that "we are justified by faith, and we therefore have peace with God." In other words, we need merely to have faith in the perspective that we are OK as far as God is concerned.

2. Overgeneralization (OG):

You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.

Example: An example of this type of thinking would occur when a shy young man, who is self-conscious of his artificial leg, mustered up his courage to ask a woman for a date. When she politely declined because of a previous engagement, he said to himself, "I'm never going to get a date. No one wants to date a guy with only one leg." He believed that all women will turn him down just because one declined his offer. And, he erroneously assumed it was because of his artificial leg. The pain of rejection is generated almost entirely from overgeneralization.

A. Why is this thinking incorrect?

It is logically incorrect to conclude that one thing that happened to you once will occur over and over again. It is also incorrect to assume that all situations are similar; or that all individuals are similar.

B. Theological reflection

There are also several stories in the Bible that suggest that one failure does not therefore mean that there will always be failure. Perhaps the most vivid story is that of Jesus and Peter. In John 18: 15-17 we read that Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. This could surely be considered a major affront. One might assume with some justification that Peter had failed as a friend and could never again consider himself to be a worthy friend of anyone, especially Jesus. However, later we see Jesus asking Peter if he loves Him and Peter responding in a positive manner. We then see Jesus being willing to trust Peter with something that is very important to Jesus. (John 21:15-19 describes this situation). It certainly sounds as if one major catastrophe or mistake does not mean that the individual will continue to make those mistakes.

3. Mental Filter (MF):

You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like a drop of ink that discolors an entire beaker of water.

Example: A woman with severe arthritis failed to complete one task that she had hoped to complete. She became more depressed and angry at herself for not completing that task. She overlooked the fact that there had been many tasks that she had, in fact, completed.

A. Why is this thinking incorrect?

It is more sensible to clearly view one's environment and be aware of the positive things one has done in addition to negative occurrences. It is not adaptive to filter out anything positive. It is irrational to say, "I should preoccupy myself with dangerous or negative ideas." Nothing is gained by dwelling on them.

B. Theological reflections:

The Scriptures usually emphasize that one should reflect on the positive rather than the negative. One should certainly reflect on what is true, and that includes seeing the positive things you have accomplished. This theme is reflected in Philippians 4:8 which says, ".... whatever is true, or lovely, or gracious ... think on that. If there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise ...think about that." While the emphasis here might be on values and ideas, it could also refer to one's actions.

4. Disqualifying the Positive (DP):

You disqualify positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or other. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences. You don't just ignore positive experiences as in the Mental Filter, but you clearly and swiftly turn them into their very opposite.

Example: An example would occur when someone praises your appearance or your work and you automatically tell yourself, "They're just being nice."

A. Why is this thinking incorrect?

Again, it is maladaptive not to pay attention to feedback you get from your environment. We should take that feedback at face value and incorporate it into our understanding of ourselves. If we disbelieved everything everyone told us, we might still believe the world was flat. An adjusted person is one who pays attention to everything in their environment.

B. Theological Reflections

We must not be like the Israelites in the wilderness who made a negative interpretation of God's actions towards them. (They also probably thought the worse about other people's actions towards them.) When God took them into the wilderness, they distorted the situation and said, "God has brought us here to slay us."

Similarly, in the New Testament, a constant theme is put forth that every individual has some valuable important talents. This applies to even the individual who may think they were sitting in the back row when talents were handed out. One place where such a theme is discussed is in I Corinthians 12:4-31, especially verses 15-17 and 21-14. Those seemingly less important individuals are actually very valuable people in the larger scheme of things and have much to offer.

5. Jumping to Conclusions (JC):

You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusions. There are two areas in which depressed individuals jump to conclusions.

Mind Reading (MR):

This is one area in which depressed individuals jump to conclusions. You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you do not bother to check this out.

Example: Suppose a friend says she does not have time to have a conversation with you on the telephone at a certain point. The depressed individual may conclude, "She is ignoring me and does not want to talk with me, because she does not like me anymore."

A. Why is this thinking incorrect?

One should never make an assumption about what someone is thinking without asking them because it is usually impossible to know what another person is thinking, no matter how sure we are we know. Jumping to conclusions about what the other is thinking is also maladaptive because our negative reactions to their imagined thoughts may set up a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, we may react negatively to them when we suspect they do not like us, when in fact they do. However, our negative reactions will soon turn them off.

B. Theological reflections

In the New Testament, Jesus provides a perfect example of someone who chooses to

check out what people were actually thinking about him, rather than merely make assumptions. A good example of this is in Mark 8:27, when He said, "who do men say that I am?" It may be also that we begin to try to read other's minds because we are overly concerned about their perceptions of us, to the extent of basing our worth on their perceptions of us. Jesus, however, presents an example of someone 'who was not overly concerned about others' impression of Him, and indeed, surely did not have the favor of most people. He even went so far as to contend that, "Blessed are you when men hate you," (Luke 6:22).

The Fortune Telling Error (FT):

The second way in which depressed individuals jump to conclusions is they anticipate that things will turn out badly. They feel convinced that their predictions are an already established fact.

Example: Depressed individuals will tell themselves that they are never going to recover, "I will feel miserable forever."

A. Why is this thinking incorrect?

No one has ever successfully predicted the future; there are so many factors that could have an impact upon the future. Furthermore, our predictions are likely to be even more off base if we predict only negative events because probability suggests that both positive and negative events will occur.

B. Theological Reflections

Often our jumping to conclusions regarding the future implies a fear about the future. The New Testament certainly emphasizes the idea that God will give us a spirit of power and love, the ability to control our fears rather than a spirit of timidity (2 Timothy 1:7). There is also the theme of anxiety concerning the future in Matthew 6:25-34. Essentially, by worrying and imaging a negative future we do not improve the situation. Our thoughts should be on the present. (verse 34).

6. Magnification (Catastrophizing) or Minimization (MM):

You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up or someone else's achievement), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other fellow's imperfections). This is also called the "binocular trick".

Example: A depressed individual accidentally misfiled some papers while working at his job. He concluded, "I made a mistake. How horrible! Everyone will think I am incompetent." An example of minimization would occur when the same employee was told by one of his or her colleagues that he had done a good job on a report. His reaction was to think , "Oh well, doing the report was very simple and anyone could do a good job on it."

A. Why is this thinking incorrect?

It is important to have an accurate perception of ourselves and our performance. It is also important to realize that everyone makes mistakes and that they are to be expected. It is impossible for anyone to be perfect.

B. Theological reflections

Perhaps Christ's temptation in the garden (recorded in Matthew 26:39, 42) was a temptation not to drink the cup of humanness, not to identify with humanity in their imperfections. Often the negative events that happen to us are merely part of that humanness, and we do not wish to accept that. Becoming close to Christ, therefore, does not mean perfection; but rather sharing in His poverty.

In the Old Testament, Psalm 88 goes even further in lessening the sting of negative events. In that particular Psalm, the suggestion is made that perhaps the negative events are precipitated by God, the implication being that God has a good purpose behind them. Indeed, this was the theme of a Christian writer, Juliana of Norwich, writing in *Revelations of Divine Love* she contends that the Lord rejoices at the tribulations of His servants... and He lays on His beloved something that is no lack in His (God's) sight but by which the person is lowered in the world. This He does to preserve the individual from pomp, and to make them holy.

As far as the minimization of our positive aspects, we have only to recall again the New Testament discussion of gifts. More specifically, every individual has something that is valuable, and should consider it so (I Corinthians 12:4-31).

7. Emotional Reasoning (ER):

You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore, it must be true."

Example: A depressed individual may tell himself, "I feel overwhelmed and hopeless, therefore, my problems must be impossible to solve, or I'll feel inadequate, therefore, I must be a worthless person."

A. Why is this thinking incorrect?

One cannot assume that one's emotions are a reflection of the true state of things. Our emotions are a reflection of our thoughts and beliefs, which as we have seen are a product of our past and may be distorted. Emotions may also be a reflection of our physiology and how tired we are, but they are not necessarily a reflection of the true state of affairs.

B. Theological Reflections

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament speak much about negative emotions and their role in our life.

a) John 1:12 suggests that our standing with God may be dependent upon our actions and belief, but it says nothing about it being dependent upon our feelings.

b) Christian writers have often commented that faith is only faith when there is darkness, when the individual does not even feel God. As long as there is a feeling of God's presence, we do not have to go on blind faith. Juliana of Norwich has commented that our prayers are most precious to God when we feel nothing because then we have faith.

c) Often in our growth as a Christian, we must go through difficult times. This is certainly the impression one gets in Psalm 63 where the writer reports a general dissatisfaction, a dryness and a longing for God. If that dryness and longing were not there, then the individual would not rejoice to find God, who is often described as the living water (John 4:10 and John 7:38). Water only tastes good to the thirsty.

d) Finally, the spiritual injunction that one should give up their life in order to save it could be applied to emotions. Often we seek God only for selfish ends, only to feel good, rather than for God's purposes (Matthew 10:39). Feelings of longing or desolation may actually be positive in that they imply a growth process we are willing to go through.

8. Should Statements (SS):

You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn'ts, as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. "Musts" and "oughts" are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements towards others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.

Example: One example is the depressed housewife who says to herself, "I should keep my house cleaner, and I shouldn't complain," or, "I should be able to get my work done during the day."

A. Why is this thinking incorrect?

"Should" statements generate a lot of unnecessary emotional turmoil in your daily life, and, paradoxically, usually do not motivate you to change your behavior. Usually, you resent the source of the "shoulds." Saying, "I should do this", or "I must do this," usually causes one to feel pressured and resentful.

B. Theological Reflection

One of the central themes of the New Testament is that Christ has given us a spirit of freedom and accepted us, and we should not condemn ourselves by getting upset at ourselves if we do not perform the way we think we should perform (Romans 8: 31), or the way others think we should. Saying, "I shouldn't do that," leads to a spirit of condemnation. Even if we do not do any "shoulds," God still loves us, (Romans 5:8). We are made OK with God simply by grace, not by our pressured determination to keep all the "shoulds" in one's life. (Romans 5:1-2).

9. Labeling and Mislabeling (L or ML):

This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a loser." When someone else's behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him or her: "You are an idiot." Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.

Example: An individual fails to get a job which they applied for and they call themselves a "failure."

A. Why is this thinking incorrect?

We are not our behavior. Labeling yourself is not only self-defeating, it is irrational. You cannot be equated with any one thing you do. Your life is made up of many events, thoughts, actions, and emotions. For example, you do not call yourself a "Breather" just because you breathe. Likewise, you do not call yourself a "failure" because you made a mistake.

B. Theological Reflection

God does not base our worth on our activities. Likewise, He does not label us based on our activities. God has a great love for us and rejoices in us even when our activities would not merit that. The parable of the lost coin in Luke 15:8-10 suggests our worth is not based on our activities but is a reflection of much more. Likewise, in the story of the prodigal son, Luke 5: 1-24, we read that the son's worth was not based on his behavior.

10. Personalization (P):

You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event for which you were not primarily responsible.

Example: One example is the child who misbehaves or is rude. The depressed mother says, "I am a failure or a bad mother," (as if she could control everything her child did).

A. Why is this thinking incorrect?

Essentially, the person with this problem has confused influence with control. While we obviously have some influence over people, especially our children, we cannot control everything they do. What another individual does is ultimately their responsibility and decision, not yours. We are not omnipotent.

B. Theological Reflection

God has control over the events that happen in the world. However, for the most part, we do not. We should not presume to be God or try to do so. This is especially important when negative events happen to us.