

# PARENT HANDOUT: THINKING TRAPS



## WHAT ARE THINKING TRAPS?

- ▶ **Thinking Traps** are ways of thinking that increase anxiety, worry, and stress. They often involve jumping to conclusions, guessing that things will go badly in the future, and making connections that might not really make sense.
- ▶ Here are **4 Common Thinking Traps** that are often connected to anxiety. Discuss these with your child and see if you can come up with more examples that apply to them.

## HERE'S HOW TO DECREASE THINKING TRAPS

Ask your child these questions to help them think in more positive ways:

- 1 **What are the facts? What is the likelihood that what you're worrying about will happen?** Often there is very little evidence that the things we are worried about will actually happen! Working with your child to look at the facts will help them think more realistically and often empower them to notice that they are capable of facing their fears.
- 2 **What would you tell a friend in this situation?** Focusing on helping a peer may help your child with perspective taking and problem solving. This strategy can help them feel calmer and more positive about their worry.
- 3 **What can you do to solve your problem or take your mind off the worry?** If possible, help your child take concrete steps to solve their problem. If that's not possible, encourage them to use relaxation or other coping skills (Anxiety Skill 2) to reduce anxiety and take their mind off things.



### FORTUNE TELLING

#### **Predicting that bad things will happen in the future.**

People with anxiety often spend a lot of time imagining bad things they fear will happen in the future.

**Fortune Telling Example:** "My parents are going out to dinner. What if something bad happens to them? They might get food poisoning and have to go to the hospital! We'll be all alone!"



### CATASTROPHIZING

#### **Making little problems or worries seem like big problems.**

When we catastrophize, we make a big deal out of our worries, even when they might actually be pretty small.

**Catastrophizing Example:** "I'm feeling a little nervous about the play tomorrow. I'm probably going to forget all my lines and get laughed off the stage! I should tell my mom I'm sick."



### OVERGENERALIZATION

#### **Assuming that because we were worried or nervous in one situation, we will feel like that again.**

When we overgeneralize, we ignore the unique facts about a situation.

**Overgeneralization Example:** "I was nervous about that math test, because I didn't study as much as I should have. I'm going to do terribly on my science test, too! I know I studied, but I bet I'll get a bad grade again."



### ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING

#### **Seeing things as "all good" or "all bad."**

When we use all-or-nothing thinking, we ignore the fact that many situations are somewhere in between and have both positive *and* negative aspects.

**All-or-Nothing Thinking Example:** "That dog jumped on me and freaked me out! All dogs are scary and mean."

# CHILD WORKSHEET: THINKING TRAP PRACTICE

Here's an example of how to use your new skills to deal with a **Catastrophizing Thinking Trap**:



"I'm feeling nervous about the play tomorrow. I'm probably going to forget all my lines and get laughed off the stage! I should tell my mom I'm sick."

What are the Facts?	"I've been in six plays before and have never forgotten my lines. I did really well at the dress rehearsal yesterday. My friend made mistakes in the last play, and no one laughed."
What Would I Say to a Friend?	"You've worked hard, and it's going to go great!"
What can I do to take my mind off things?	"I'm going to go play a game with my brother to forget about this for a little while."

**FORTUNE TELLING:** "My parents are going out to dinner. What if something bad happens to them? They might get food poisoning and have to go to the hospital! We'll be all alone!"

What are the Facts?	
What Would I Say to a Friend?	
What can I do to take my mind off things?	

**OVERGENERALIZATION:** "I was nervous about that math test, because I didn't study as much as I should have. I'm going to do terribly on my science test, too! I know I studied, but I bet I'll get a bad grade again."

What are the Facts?	
What Would I Say to a Friend?	
What can I do to take my mind off things?	

**ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING:** "That dog jumped on me and freaked me out! All dogs are scary and mean."

What are the Facts?	
What Would I Say to a Friend?	
What can I do to take my mind off things?	

# PARENT HANDOUT: THINKING TRAPS TIPS



Anxiety Skill 3

## HOW CAN UNDERSTANDING THINKING TRAPS HELP MY FAMILY?

- ▶ When people experience worry and anxiety, they often think about their present situation and things that might happen in the future in negative ways.
- ▶ By learning about thinking traps (i.e., ways of thinking that make us feel worried, stuck, or upset), your family can help each other pay attention to the ways you talk and think about anxiety.
- ▶ Once everyone has practiced noticing their thinking traps, you can help each other take those thinking trap statements and make them more positive and realistic.
- ▶ Learning how to discuss anxiety in realistic and self-esteem boosting ways can help your whole family feel more confident and capable when facing stressful situations.

## COMMON PARENT CONCERNS

### **Some of the thinking traps are hard for my child to understand.**

If a particular type of thinking trap is challenging for your child, brainstorm additional examples that might make it clearer. Ask friends and family to help if needed. Examples that connect to your child's interests (e.g., their favorite sport or movie) can be very useful. If your child struggles to separate the thinking traps into different categories, just focus on noticing worry-increasing thoughts in general and changing them. For example, call them "worry thoughts" or using their "worry brain." You can still improve thinking this way.

### **My child says that thinking traps aren't a problem for them, but I know that they are.**

It's hard for people of all ages to notice or acknowledge a harmful habit. Be an example by pointing out thinking traps in your own life (e.g., "When I realized I was running late to get you, I was so worried you'd be upset or alone and think I'm the worst mom ever! Then I realized I was *catastrophizing* and reminded myself that traffic is terrible and you were safe playing with your friends."). Make similar connections in media you watch together (e.g., "Is that character using a thinking trap? Which one?"). Gently bring up times you notice your child using a thinking trap after the situation has calmed down (e.g., "Before your game, you were worried that your team was definitely going to lose. I wonder if that was a thinking trap, maybe *fortune telling*? Just because you're nervous doesn't mean that you're not great! You all have been practicing so hard.").

### **Changing negative thinking is very hard for my child.**

Negative thoughts are often automatic, like a habit. Becoming a more positive thinker requires breaking this habit. It takes a lot of practice to make a change like this! Start with more fun and playful examples if jumping right into your child's particular style of anxious thinking feels overwhelming. Practice on a regular basis for a few minutes at a time (daily if you can manage it) to start forming a new habit of positive thinking. If your child is still having a difficult time, talk to your child's primary care provider. They can connect you to a behavioral health specialist who can help.