

PARENT HANDOUT: THINKING TRAPS



WHAT ARE THINKING TRAPS?

- ▶ **Thinking Traps** are ways of thinking that increase sadness, anger, 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 sadness and depression. Discuss these with your child and see if you can come up with more examples that apply to them.

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 stressed 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 solving their problems.
- 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 stress.
- 3 **What can you do to solve your problem or take your mind off it?** 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 (Depression Skill 3) reduce stress and take their mind off things.



CATASTROPHIZING

Making little problems or disappointments seem like big problems.

When we catastrophize, we make a big deal out of situations, even when they might not be that serious.

Catastrophizing Example: "My best friend sat with a new kid at lunch yesterday. She probably hates me now and is going to ditch me."



FORTUNE TELLING

Predicting that bad things will happen in the future.

People who struggle with negative thinking often spend a lot of time imagining bad things happening in the future. People dealing with depression sometimes predict their sadness will continue.

Fortune Telling Example: "I've felt really sad for the past few weeks. I'm probably going to be sad forever."



OVERGENERALIZATION

Assuming that because we had a hard time in one situation, our same problem will happen again in a new one.

When we overgeneralize, we are ignoring the unique facts about a situation.

Overgeneralization Example: "Painting was tough for me in art class. I'm going to be terrible at drawing and pottery, too!"



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: "I got three problems wrong out of ten on the math homework. I'm terrible at math."

CHILD WORKSHEET: THINKING TRAP PRACTICE

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

"I've felt really sad for the past few weeks. I'm probably going to be sad forever."



What are the facts?	"My mom and dad are helping me learn ways to feel better. I already feel happy sometimes after I use my coping skills. I've felt sad in the past, and it didn't last forever."
What would I say to a friend?	"It's going to get better! You are working hard at being more positive."
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 thought for a little while."

CATASTROPHIZING: "My best friend sat with a new kid at lunch yesterday. I bet he hates me now and is going to ditch me."

What are the facts?	
What would I say to a friend?	
What can I do to take my mind off things?	

OVERGENERALIZATION: "Painting was tough for me in art class. I'm going to be terrible at drawing and pottery, too!"

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: "I got three problems wrong out of ten on the math homework. I'm terrible at math."

What are the facts?	
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What can I do to take my mind off things?	

PARENT HANDOUT: THINKING TRAPS TIPS



Depression Skill 4

HOW CAN UNDERSTANDING THINKING TRAPS HELP MY FAMILY?

- ▶ When people experience sadness or depression, they often think about the past, their present situation, and/or things that might happen in the future in negative ways. These negative thought patterns often make them feel worse and can lead to feelings of hopelessness or helplessness.
- ▶ By learning about thinking traps (i.e., ways of thinking that make us feel sad, stuck, or angry), your child will learn to identify times they may be thinking in overly negative or unrealistic ways.
- ▶ Your family can also help each other pay attention to the ways you talk about feelings and problems. Once everyone has practiced noticing the thinking traps, you can help each other take those thinking trap statements and make them more positive and realistic.
- ▶ Learning how to discuss feelings and problems 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 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 negative thoughts in general and changing them. For example, call them "sad thoughts" or another name you come up with together. 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 a role model by pointing out thinking traps out in your own life (e.g., "I noticed the living room was messy and thought, 'This house is always a mess!'. That made me feel sad and frustrated. Then I realized that was *all-or-nothing thinking* because the rest of the house is clean!"). 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 when the situation is calmer (e.g., "After you guys lost that tough game, you said that you wanted to quit basketball because it 'will always be this way'. I wonder if that was a thinking trap, maybe *overgeneralization*? Just because you lost that one game doesn't mean you will lose every game in the future and you've told me that you love playing basketball.").

Changing negative thinking is very hard for my child.

Negative thoughts are often automatic, like a bad 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 own thinking patterns 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.