
Thinking Traps

1 Jumping to Conclusions

On the basis of insufficient evidence, we may jump to a conclusion, sometimes with harmful results for ourselves and others. The opposite of this thinking trap is to realize that no one really has a complete understanding of the world around us, and to be humble about making an assumption that I understand everything about what's going on at a particular moment in time. Sometimes this idea is called epistemic humility: being humble about how much knowledge I have and remembering that I might be wrong.

Some questions I can ask myself might be: "What if I was wrong about this?" "What if it were not the case...? What else might be possible?" For example, if someone walks by without saying hello, you might jump to the conclusion that they are angry with you. But you could then stop and ask, "What if it isn't the case that they're angry at me? What other reasons might there be for them not saying hello?" Approaching the situation with a critical thinking lens helps open up a range of other possibilities.

2 Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing means getting lost in a string of "What if?" questions that magnify a problem until it seems disastrous. For example, one notices a small lump on one's skin. This could be a problem, but it could also be nothing serious. Catastrophizing would be to compulsively worry about all the things it could possibly be: "What if it's this? What if it's that? What if I'm going to get sick?"

While it's good to be alert to problems, catastrophizing is rarely helpful or constructive. It can be useful to remind oneself, "That might be true, but the opposite might also be true."

It can also be helpful to think of a quote from the ancient Indian philosopher Shantideva, who said, "If there is a solution to the problem, why worry? And if there is no solution, what good will worrying do?" The point is that it is constructive action and constructive thinking, rather than worrying, which can help us most effectively.

3 Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization means taking a single instance, or a few instances, and turning them into a general rule. For example, if I fail at something once or twice, I may conclude that I will always fail at it. Or if I see someone do something harmful, I may decide that they are always doing harmful things, or that they are a bad person.