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## Chapter 3

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# Changing Patterns of Limited Thinking

A man walks up to a drugstore counter and asks for a particular brand of dental floss. The clerk says it's out of stock. The man concludes that the clerk has the dental floss, but just wants to get rid of him because she doesn't like his looks. This logic seems obviously irrational and paranoid.

But consider the case of the woman whose husband comes home with a cloudy look on his face. She immediately concludes that he is angry because she was too tired to make love the previous night. She expects to be hurt by some sort of retaliation and responds quickly by becoming peevish and defensive. This logic makes perfect sense to her and she does not question her conclusion until she learns that her husband had a minor auto accident on the way home.

The progression of logic she used goes like this:

1. My husband looks upset.
2. My husband often gets upset when I disappoint him.
3. Therefore, he's upset with me for disappointing him.

The problem with this logic lies in her assumptions that her husband's moods must all relate to her and that she is the prime cause of his ups and downs. This pattern of limited thinking is called *personalization*, the tendency to relate all the objects and events around you to yourself. Personalization limits you and causes pain because you consistently misinterpret what you see and then act on that misinterpretation.

This chapter will examine eight limited-thinking patterns and give you practice in identifying them. The chapter continues by teaching you to analyze the automatic thoughts you recorded in chapter 2, noticing which of the limited-thinking patterns you habitually employ in difficult situations. You'll learn how to compose balanced, alternative self-statements that will become more believable than your painful automatic thoughts.

## Symptom Effectiveness

Challenging automatic thoughts is a powerful way to counter perfectionism, curb procrastination, and relieve depression and anxiety.

The techniques in this chapter are based on the cognitive therapy of Aaron Beck (1976), who pioneered this method of analyzing automatic thoughts and composing rational comebacks to refute and replace distorted thinking. This approach works well for abstract thinkers—people who can analyze their automatic thoughts to find thematic patterns of limited thinking.

## Time for Mastery

You should begin to get results in one to four weeks of analyzing your automatic thoughts.

If you try all of the exercises in this chapter and still have difficulty picking out your limited-thinking patterns, don't give up hope. Go on to the next chapter, which will help you accomplish the same result by compiling the evidence for and against the thoughts that trigger your painful emotions.

## Instructions

### *Eight Patterns of Limited Thinking*

1. **Filtering** This pattern is characterized by a sort of tunnel vision—looking at only one element of a situation to the exclusion of everything else. A single detail is picked out and the whole event or situation is colored by this detail. For example, a computer draftsman who was uncomfortable with criticism was praised for the quality of his recent detail drawings and asked if he could get the next job out a little more quickly. He went home depressed, having decided that his employer thought he was dawdling. He filtered out the praise and focused only on the criticism.

Each person looks through his or her own particular tunnel. Depressed people are hypersensitive to loss and blind to gain. For anxious people, the slightest possibility of danger sticks out like a barb in a scene that might otherwise be safe and secure. People who experience chronic anger look through a tunnel that highlights evidence of injustice and screens out fairness and equity.

Memory can also be very selective. You may remember only certain kinds of events from your entire history and stock of experience. When you filter your memories, you often pass over positive experiences and dwell only on the memories that characteristically leave you angry, anxious, or depressed.

The filtering pattern "awfulizes" your thoughts by pulling negative events out of context and magnifying them, while ignoring all your good experiences. Your fears,

losses, and irritations become exaggerated in importance because they fill your awareness to the exclusion of everything else. Key words for the filtering pattern are *terrible, awful, disgusting, scary, horrendous*, and so on. A key phrase is "I can't stand it."

2. **Polarized Thinking** This is black-and-white thinking, with no shades of gray allowed. You insist on "either/or" choices, perceiving everything at the extremes with very little room for a middle ground. People and things are good or bad, wonderful or horrible, delightful or intolerable. Since your interpretations are extreme, your emotional reactions are extreme, fluctuating from despair to elation to rage to ecstasy to terror.

The greatest danger in polarized thinking is its impact on how you judge yourself. You could believe that if you aren't perfect or brilliant, then you must be a failure or an imbecile. There's no room for mistakes or mediocrity. For example, a charter bus driver told himself he was a real loser when he took the wrong freeway exit and had to drive two miles out of his way. One mistake meant that he was incompetent and worthless. A single mother with three children was determined to be strong and "in charge." The moment she felt tired or nervous, she began thinking of herself as weak and falling apart, and she often criticized herself in conversations with friends.

3. **Overgeneralization** In this pattern, you make a broad, general conclusion based on a single incident or piece of evidence. One dropped stitch leads you to conclude: "I'll never learn how to knit." You interpret a rejection on the dance floor as: "Nobody would ever want to dance with me."

This pattern can lead to an increasingly restricted life. If you got sick on a train once, you decide never to take a train again. If you got dizzy on a sixth floor balcony, you never go out there again. If you felt anxious the last time your husband took a business trip, you'll be a wreck every time he leaves town. One bad experience means that whenever you're in a similar situation you will repeat the bad experience.

Overgeneralizations are often couched in the form of absolute statements, as if there were some immutable law that governs and limits your chances for happiness. Some of the cue words that indicate you may be overgeneralizing are *all, every, none, never, always, everybody*, and *nobody*. For example, you are overgeneralizing when you absolutely conclude: "Nobody loves me," "I'll never be able to trust anyone again," "I will always be sad," "I've always had lousy jobs," "No one would stay friends with me if they really knew me."

Another hallmark of overgeneralization is the global label for persons, places, and things you don't like: Somebody who refused to give you a ride home is labeled a "total jerk." A quiet guy on a date is a "dull clam." Democrats are "knee-jerk liberals." New York City is "hell on earth." Television is an "evil, corrupting influence." You're "stupid" and "totally wasting your life."

Each of these labels may contain a grain of truth, but it generalizes that grain into a global judgment. The overgeneralized label ignores all contrary evidence, making your view of the world stereotyped and one-dimensional.

4. **Mind Reading** When you mind read, you make snap judgments about others. You assume you know how others are feeling and what motivates them: "He's just acting

that way because he's jealous," "She's only interested in your money," "He's afraid to show he cares."

If your brother visits a new woman acquaintance three times in one week, you might conclude that he is (a) in love, (b) angry at his old girlfriend and hoping she'll find out, (c) depressed and on the rebound, or (d) afraid of being alone again. Without asking, you have no way of knowing which is true. Mind reading makes one conclusion *seem* so obviously correct that you assume it's true, act on it in some inappropriate way, and get into trouble.

As a mind reader, you also make assumptions about how people are reacting to you. You might assume what your boyfriend is thinking and say to yourself, "This close he sees how unattractive I am." If he is mind reading too, he may be saying to himself, "She thinks I'm really immature." You may have a casual encounter with your supervisor at work and come away thinking, "They're getting ready to fire me." These assumptions are born of intuition, hunches, vague misgivings, or a couple of past experiences. They are untested and unprovable, but you believe them nonetheless.

Mind reading depends on a process called projection. You imagine that people feel the same way you do and react to things the same way you do. Therefore you don't watch or listen closely enough to notice that they are actually different. If you get angry when someone is late, you imagine everyone feels that way. If you feel excruciatingly sensitive to rejection, you expect that most people are the same. If you are very judgmental about particular habits and traits, you assume others share your beliefs.

**5. Catastrophizing** If you "catastrophize," a small leak in the sailboat means it will surely sink. A contractor whose estimate gets underbid concludes he'll never get another job. A headache suggests that brain cancer is looming. Catastrophic thoughts often start with the words *what if*. You read a newspaper article describing a tragedy or hear gossip about some disaster befalling an acquaintance, and you start wondering, "What if it happens to me? What if I break my leg skiing? What if they hijack my plane? What if I get sick and have to go on disability? What if my son starts taking drugs?" The list is endless. There are no limits to a really fertile catastrophic imagination.

**6. Magnifying** When you magnify, you emphasize things out of proportion to their actual importance. Small mistakes become tragic failures. Minor suggestions become scathing criticism. A slight backache becomes a ruptured disk. Minor setbacks become cause for despair. Slight obstacles become overwhelming barriers.

Words like *huge*, *impossible*, and *overwhelming* are magnifying terms. This pattern creates a tone of doom and hysterical pessimism.

The flip side of magnifying is minimizing. When you magnify, you view everything negative and difficult in your life through a telescope that enlarges your problems. But when you view your assets, such as your ability to cope and find solutions, you look through the wrong end of the telescope so that everything positive is minimized.

**7. Personalization** There are two kinds of personalization. The first kind involves directly comparing yourself with other people: "He plays piano so much better than

I," "I'm not smart enough to go with this crowd," "She knows herself a lot better than I do," "He feels things so deeply while I'm dead inside," "I'm the slowest person in the office." Sometimes the comparison is actually favorable to you: "He's dumb (and I'm smart)," "I'm better looking than she." The opportunities for comparison never end. And, even when the comparison is favorable, the underlying assumption is that your worth is questionable. Consequently you must continue to test your value, constantly measuring yourself against others. If you come out better, you have a moment's relief. If you come up short, you feel diminished.

This chapter began with an example of the other kind of personalization—the tendency to relate everything around you to yourself. A depressed mother blames herself when she sees any sadness in her children. A businessman thinks that every time his partner complains of being tired, he means he's tired of him. A man whose wife complains of rising prices hears the complaints as attacks on his ability as a breadwinner.

8. **Shoulds** In this pattern, you operate from a list of inflexible rules about how you and other people should act. The rules are right and indisputable. Any deviation from your particular values or standards is bad. As a result, you are often judging others and finding fault. People irritate you. They don't act correctly and they don't think correctly. They have unacceptable traits, habits, and opinions that make them hard to tolerate. They should know the rules, and they should follow them.

One woman felt that her husband should want to take her on Sunday drives. She decided that a man who loves his wife ought to take her to the country and then out to eat in a nice place. The fact that he didn't want to meant that he "only thought about himself." Cue words indicating the presence of this pattern are *should*, *ought*, or *must*. In fact, Albert Ellis (Ellis and Harper 1961) has dubbed this thinking pattern "musterbation."

Your shoulds are just as hard on you as they are on other people. You feel compelled to be or act a certain way, but you never ask objectively if it really makes sense. Psychiatrist Karen Horney (1939) called this the "tyranny of shoulds."

Here is a list of some of the most common and unreasonable shoulds:

- I should be the epitome of generosity, consideration, dignity, courage, and unselfishness.
- I should be the perfect lover, friend, parent, teacher, student, or spouse.
- I should be able to endure any hardship with equanimity.
- I should be able to find a quick solution to every problem.
- I should never feel hurt; I should always be happy and serene.
- I should know, understand, and foresee everything.
- I should always be spontaneous, but also always control my feelings.
- I should never feel certain emotions, such as anger or jealousy.
- I should love my children equally.

- I should never make mistakes.
- My emotions should be constant. Once I feel love, I should always feel love.
- I should be totally self-reliant.
- I should assert myself but I should never hurt anybody else.
- I should never be tired or get sick.
- I should always be at peak efficiency.

## Summary

### Eight Limited-Thinking Patterns

1. **Filtering:** You focus on the negative details while ignoring all the positive aspects of a situation.
2. **Polarized Thinking:** Things are black or white, good or bad. You have to be perfect or you're a failure. There's no middle ground, no room for mistakes.
3. **Overgeneralization:** You reach a general conclusion based on a single incident or piece of evidence. You exaggerate the frequency of problems and use negative global labels.
4. **Mind Reading:** Without their saying so, you know what people are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, you have certain knowledge of how people think and feel about you.
5. **Catastrophizing:** You expect, even visualize disaster. You notice or hear about a problem and start asking, "What if?" What if tragedy strikes? What if it happens to you?
6. **Magnifying:** You exaggerate the degree or intensity of a problem. You turn up the volume on anything bad, making it loud, large, and overwhelming.
7. **Personalization:** You assume that everything people do or say is some kind of reaction to you. You also compare yourself to others, trying to determine who is smarter, more competent, better looking, and so on.
8. **Shoulds:** You have a list of ironclad rules about how you and other people should act. People who break the rules anger you, and you feel guilty when you violate the rules.

## Exercises

The following exercises are designed to help you notice and identify limited-thinking patterns. Work through the exercises one after another. Refer back to the above summary and carefully analyze how each statement or situation is based on one or more limited-thinking patterns.

### Matching Exercise

Draw a line connecting the sentence in the first column and the pattern it exemplifies in the second column.

#### Statement

1. Ever since Lisa, I've never trusted a redhead.
2. Quite a few people here seem smarter than me.
3. You're either for me or against me.
4. I could have enjoyed the picnic, but the chicken was burnt.
5. He's always smiling, but I know he doesn't like me.
6. I'm afraid the relationship's over because he hasn't called for two days.
7. You should never ask people personal questions.
8. These tax forms are impossible—I'll never get finished.

#### Pattern

- Filtering
- Polarized Thinking
- Overgeneralization
- Mind Reading
- Catastrophizing
- Magnifying
- Personalization
- Shoulds

- Answer Key*
1. Overgeneralization
  2. Personalization
  3. Polarized Thinking
  4. Filtering
  5. Mind Reading
  6. Catastrophizing
  7. Shoulds
  8. Magnifying

### Multiple Choice

In this exercise, circle the limited-thinking pattern(s) present in each example. There may be more than one right answer.

1. The washing machine breaks down. A mother with twins in diapers says to herself, "This always happens. I can't stand it. The whole day's ruined."

- |                       |                 |              |
|-----------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| a. Overgeneralization | c. Shoulds      | e. Filtering |
| b. Polarized Thinking | d. Mind Reading |              |

2. "He looked up from across the table and said, 'That's interesting.' I knew he was dying for breakfast to be over so he could get away from me."

- a. Magnifying
- b. Polarized Thinking
- c. Shoulds
- d. Mind Reading
- e. Personalization

3. A man was trying to get his girlfriend to be warmer and more supportive. He got irritated every night when she didn't ask him how his day was or failed to give him the attention he expected.

- a. Shoulds
- b. Personalization
- c. Overgeneralization
- d. Catastrophizing
- e. Magnifying

4. A driver feels nervous on long trips, afraid of having car trouble or getting sick and being stranded far from home. Faced with having to drive 500 miles to Chicago and back, he tells himself, "It's too far. My car has over 60,000 miles on it—it'll never make it."

- a. Overgeneralization
- b. Catastrophizing
- c. Filtering
- d. Magnifying
- e. Mind Reading

5. Getting ready for the prom, a high school student thinks, "I've got the worst hips in my homeroom, and the second-worst hair. . . . If this French twist comes undone, I'll just die. I'll never get it back together and the evening will be ruined. . . . I hope Ron gets his Dad's car. If only he does, everything will be perfect."

- a. Personalization
- b. Polarized Thinking
- c. Filtering
- d. Mind Reading
- e. Catastrophizing

Answer Key  
 1. a, e  
 2. d  
 3. a  
 4. b, d  
 5. a, b, e

### *Circle the Pattern and Quote the Phrase*

The following exercises require a little more work on your part. Read the statement and circle the applicable patterns in the list following the statement. Next to each pattern, write the phrase that contains it.

1. "Jim's so easily upset, you just can't talk to him. He blows up at everything. He just doesn't have my patience. What if he blows up at work? He'll lose his job and we'll be homeless in about two weeks."

**Pattern**

**Phrase Containing the Pattern**

Filtering

\_\_\_\_\_

Polarized Thinking

\_\_\_\_\_

Overgeneralization

\_\_\_\_\_

Mind Reading

\_\_\_\_\_

Catastrophizing

\_\_\_\_\_



Magnifying \_\_\_\_\_  
 Personalization \_\_\_\_\_  
 Shoulds \_\_\_\_\_

2. "One time she came up to me and said, 'This nursing station looks like a cyclone hit it. Better clean up the mess before the shift is over.' Well, I said, 'This was a mess when I got here. It's not my fault. The night shift shouldn't be allowed to punch out unless all the charts are filed.' She knew it wasn't my mess. She wants to fire me and she's just looking for an excuse."

<b>Pattern</b>	<b>Phrase Containing the Pattern</b>
Filtering	_____
Polarized Thinking	_____
Overgeneralization	_____
Mind Reading	_____
Catastrophizing	_____
Magnifying	_____
Personalization	_____
Shoulds	_____

3. "A lot of the time I feel nervous when I'm out with Ed. I keep thinking how smart he is, how sophisticated, and that I'm just a hayseed by comparison. He cocks his head and he looks at me and I know he's thinking how dumb I am. He's really sweet and we have a good time talking. But when he cocks his head, I feel like I'll be dumped. One time he kind of wrinkled up his face when I said something a little critical about his jacket. Now I'm afraid to say anything for fear of hurting him.

"Usually I think Ed is completely wonderful. But last week he made me take the bus to his house instead of picking me up. I suddenly felt he didn't give a damn, that he was just another jerk. That was a passing thing, and now he's wonderful again. My only problem is this business of being nervous when he cocks his head."

<b>Pattern</b>	<b>Phrase Containing the Pattern</b>
Filtering	_____
Polarized Thinking	_____
Overgeneralization	_____
Mind Reading	_____
Catastrophizing	_____
Magnifying	_____

Personalization \_\_\_\_\_

Shoulds \_\_\_\_\_

4. "There are three ways to make a magazine go: work, work, and more work. If you have to work sixteen hours a day to get it out, then that's what you have to do. These kids today want to go home at five o'clock. If they're too lazy to work, I say get rid of them. Profits get slimmer every year because of total laziness. It's the way they're raised—the way the whole damn country is falling apart. In five years it'll drive me under. There are just two kinds of editors: the ones who get the job done and the nine-to-fivers. It's the nine-to-fivers who will put me under. I can't fight the whole world."

Pattern	Phrase Containing the Pattern
Filtering	_____
Polarized Thinking	_____
Overgeneralization	_____
Mind Reading	_____
Catastrophizing	_____
Magnifying	_____
Personalization	_____
Shoulds	_____

*Answer Key*

1. Overgeneralization: "He blows up at everything."  
 Catastrophizing: "He'll lose his job and we'll be homeless."  
 2. Mind Reading: "She knew . . . She wants . . . she's just looking . . ."  
 Shoulds: "The night shift shouldn't . . ."  
 3. Mind Reading: "I know he's thinking how dumb I am."  
 Personalization: "I feel nervous when I'm out with Ed." (assuming all Ed's behavior relates to her)  
 Polarized Thinking: "he was just another jerk . . . now he's wonderful again."  
 4. Shoulds: "that's what you have to do."  
 Filtering: "Profits get slimmer . . . total laziness" (sees laziness only)  
 Polarized Thinking: "There are just two kinds of editors."  
 Magnifying: "I can't fight the whole world."

## Thought Journal

Now that you have learned to identify limited-thinking patterns, it's time to apply your new skill to the Thought Journal you started in the previous chapter. Three new columns have been added to the blank form that follows. You now have space to fill in your limited-thinking patterns, balanced or alternative thoughts, and a re-rating of your feelings.

*Thought Journal*

<b>Situation</b> When? Where? Who? What happened?	<b>Feelings</b> One-word summaries. Rate 0-100.	<b>Automatic Thoughts</b> What you were thinking just before and during the unpleasant feeling.	<b>Limited-Thinking Pattern</b>	<b>Balancing or Alternative Thoughts</b> Circle possible action plans.	<b>Re-rate Feelings</b> 0-100.

Start by analyzing your most distressing automatic thoughts to see which limited-thinking pattern each one fits best. You may find evidence of more than one limited-thinking pattern, so write down all that apply.

In the next column, rewrite your automatic thoughts in a more balanced way, or compose an alternative thought that refutes the automatic thought. You can refer to the section that follows for help in countering the limited-thinking patterns.

In the last column, re-rate your bad feeling now that you have worked on your automatic thoughts. The feeling should be less intense after this work.

### *Composing Balancing or Alternative Thoughts*

Listed below are alternative responses to the eight limited thinking patterns. It isn't necessary to read through the list from beginning to end. Use it as a reference when you are having problems with a particular pattern.

#### 1. Filtering

##### **Pattern Summary**

- Focusing on the negative
- Filtering out the positive

##### **Key Balancing Statement**

- Shift focus

You have been stuck in a mental groove, focusing on things from your environment that typically frighten, sadden, or anger you. In order to conquer filtering you will have to deliberately shift focus. You can shift focus in two ways: First, place your attention on coping strategies for dealing with the problem rather than obsessing about the problem itself. Second, focus on the opposite of your primary mental theme. For example, if you tend to focus on the theme of loss, instead focus on what you still have that is of value. If your theme is danger, focus instead on things in your environment that represent comfort and safety. If your theme is injustice or stupidity or incompetence, shift focus to what people do that *does* meet with your approval.

#### 2. Polarized thinking

##### **Pattern Summary**

- Seeing everything as awful or great, with no middle ground

##### **Key Balancing Statements**

- No black-or-white judgments
- Think in percentages

The key to overcoming polarized thinking is to stop making black-or-white judgments. People are not either happy or sad, loving or rejecting, brave or cowardly, smart or stupid. They fall somewhere along a continuum. They are a little bit of each. Human beings are just too complex to be reduced to either/or judgments.

If you have to make these kinds of ratings, think in terms of percentages: "About 30 percent of me is scared to death, and 70 percent is holding on and coping," "About 60 percent of the time he seems terribly preoccupied with himself, but there's the 40 percent when he can be really generous," "Five percent of the time I'm an ignoramus; the rest of the time I do all right."

### 3. Overgeneralization

#### Pattern Summary

- Making sweeping statements based on scanty evidence

#### Key Balancing Statements

- Quantify
- What's the evidence?
- There are no absolutes
- No negative labels

Overgeneralization is exaggeration—the tendency to take a button and sew a vest on it. Fight it by *quantifying* instead of using words like *huge*, *awful*, *massive*, *minuscule*, and so on. For example, if you catch yourself thinking, “We’re buried under massive debt,” rephrase with a quantity: “We owe \$27,000.”

Another way to avoid overgeneralization is to examine how much evidence you really have for your conclusion. If the conclusion is based on one or two cases, a single mistake, or one small symptom, then throw it out until you have more convincing proof. This is such a powerful technique that most of the next chapter is devoted to amassing evidence for and against your hot thoughts.

Stop thinking in absolutes by avoiding words such as *every*, *all*, *always*, *none*, *never*, *everybody*, and *nobody*. Statements that include these words ignore the exceptions and shades of gray. Replace absolutes with words such as *may*, *sometimes*, and *often*. Be particularly sensitive to absolute predictions about the future such as “No one will ever love me.” They are extremely dangerous because they can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Pay close attention to the words you use to describe yourself and others. Replace frequently used negative labels with more neutral terms. For example, if you call your habitual caution *cowardice*, replace it with *care*. Think of your excitable mother as *vivacious* instead of *ditzy*. Instead of blaming yourself for being *lazy*, call yourself *laid-back*.

### 4. Mind Reading

#### Pattern Summary

- Assuming you know what others are thinking and feeling

#### Key Balancing Statements

- Check it out
- Evidence for conclusions?
- Alternative interpretations?

In the long run, you are probably better off making no inferences about people at all. Either believe what they tell you or hold no belief at all until some conclusive evidence comes your way. Treat all of your notions about people as hypotheses to be tested and checked out by asking them.

Sometimes you can't check out your interpretations. For instance, you may not be ready to ask your daughter if her withdrawal from family life means she's pregnant or taking drugs. But you can allay your anxiety by generating alternative interpretations of her behavior. Perhaps she's in love. Or premenstrual. Or studying hard. Or depressed about something. Or deeply engrossed in a project. Or worrying about her future. By generating a string of possibilities, you may find a more neutral interpretation that's as likely to be true as your direst suspicions. This process also underlines the fact that you really can't know accurately what others are thinking and feeling unless they tell you.

## 5. Catastrophizing

### Pattern Summary

- Assuming the worst will happen

### Key Balancing Statement

- What are the odds?

Catastrophizing is the royal road to anxiety. As soon as you catch yourself catastrophizing, ask yourself, "What are the odds?" Make an honest assessment of the situation in terms of odds or percent of probability. Are the chances of disaster one in 100,000 (.001 percent)? One in a thousand (.1 percent)? One in twenty (5 percent)? Looking at the odds helps you realistically evaluate whatever is frightening you.

## 6. Magnifying

### Pattern Summary

- Enlarging difficulties
- Minimizing the positive

### Key Balancing Statements

- Get things in proportion
- No need to magnify

To combat magnifying, stop using words like *terrible*, *awful*, *disgusting*, *horrendous*, etc. In particular, banish phrases like: "I can't stand it," "It's impossible," "It's unbearable." You can stand it, because history shows that human beings can survive almost any psychological blow and can endure incredible physical pain. You can get used to and cope with almost anything. Try saying to yourself phrases such as "I can cope" and "I can survive this."

## 7. Personalization

### Pattern Summary

- Assuming the reactions of others always relate to you
- Comparing yourself to others

### Key Balancing Statements

- Check it out
- We all have strong and weak points
- Comparison is meaningless

When you catch yourself comparing yourself to others, remind yourself that everyone has strong and weak points. By matching your weak points to others with corresponding strong points, you are just looking for ways to demoralize yourself.

The fact is, human beings are too complex for casual comparisons to have any meaning. It would take you months to catalog and compare all the thousands of traits and abilities of two people.

If you assume that the reactions of others are often about you, force yourself to check it out. Maybe the reason the boss is frowning *isn't* that you're late. Make no conclusion unless you are satisfied that you have reasonable evidence and proof.

## 8. Shoulds

### Pattern Summary

- Holding arbitrary rules for behavior of self and others

### Key Balancing Statements

- Flexible rules
- Values are personal

Reexamine and question any personal rules or expectations that include the words *should*, *ought*, or *must*. Flexible rules and expectations don't use these words because there

are always exceptions and special circumstances. Think of at least three exceptions to your rule, and then imagine all the exceptions there must be that you can't think of.

You may get irritated when people don't act according to your values. But your personal values are just that—personal. They may work for you, but, as missionaries have discovered all over the world, they don't always work for others. People aren't all the same.

The key is to focus on each person's uniqueness—his or her particular needs, limitations, fears, and pleasures. Because it is impossible to know all of these complex interrelations, even with intimates, you can't be certain whether your values apply to another. You are entitled to an opinion, but allow for the possibility of being wrong. Also, allow for other people to find different things important.

### *Example*

On the next page is a portion of the Thought Journal from the previous chapter, showing how the bookkeeper completed it.

The bookkeeper felt better after identifying his limited-thinking patterns and composing his alternative thoughts. He realized that he had magnified the workload to the point that he had collapsed emotionally and was working inefficiently at low-priority tasks.

He went on to examine the depression he felt at home and found that he had been filtering and mind reading.

### **Action Plans**

Your balancing or alternative thoughts may suggest actions you can take, such as checking out assumptions, gathering information, making an assertive request, clearing up misunderstandings, making plans, changing your schedule, resolving unfinished business, or making commitments. Circle those items and plan when you will put them into action.

In the example of the bookkeeper, he circled "I can prioritize the work" as an action plan to reduce anxiety on the job. He also circled "I should check it out" as an action plan to relieve the depression he felt when he assumed his wife was mad at him. It took him several days to work up the courage to ask his wife how she felt. It turned out she *was* angry, but she was mostly worried about him turning into a workaholic and getting an ulcer or having a heart attack.

It may be difficult, time consuming, or embarrassing to follow your action plan. You may have to break your plan down into a series of easier steps and schedule each step. But it's worth doing. Behavior that is inspired by your balancing or alternative thoughts will greatly reduce the frequency and power of your negative automatic thoughts.

For more on action plans, see the next chapter.

<i>Thought Journal</i>					
Situation <i>When? Where? Who? What happened?</i>	Feelings <i>One-word summaries. Rate 0-100.</i>	Automatic Thoughts <i>What you were thinking just before and during the unpleasant feeling.</i>	Limited-Thinking Pattern	Balancing or Alternative Thoughts <i>Circle possible action plans.</i>	Re-rate Feelings 0-100.
Given extra work.	Anxiety, 90.	I'll be here all night. Can't stand it. Jenny will be mad if I'm late.	Magnifying	Of course I can stand it. I've been standing it for twelve years. Jenny knows what's going on. She expects long hours this time of the year.  I can prioritize the work and concentrate on one thing at a time.	50
Have to work through lunch.	Resentment, 75.  Anxiety, 85.	They always dump on me. It's not fair.  I'm hungry. I'm tired. I can't stand this.	Catastrophizing	It's always this way at tax time. It will be better in May.	30
Watching TV with kids.	Depression, 75.	They never talk to me. They hardly know me. They don't care.	Filtering Overgeneralizing	They talk to me about baseball and trading cards and school stuff. It's the TV—they're engrossed in it and I'm not, so I sit there obsessing.	25
Wife goes to bed early.	Depression, 85.	She's really mad. She's disgusted with me.	Mind reading	I have no evidence that she's mad or disgusted. I should check it out.	30



Continue for a week with your Thought Journal, identifying your automatic thoughts and analyzing them for limited-thinking patterns. After a week you should be adept at recognizing your habitual patterns of limited thinking. You will begin to notice your automatic thoughts popping up in stressful situations. Eventually you will recognize limited-thinking patterns in real life, and correct them with balancing or alternative thoughts as you go.

If you still have trouble spotting the limited-thinking patterns after a week of practice, go on to the next chapter and try the "evidence for/evidence against" approach. It may be a better alternative for you.