Knowing Yourself

Thinking Patterns

To improve our self-esteem, we must at first know ourselves and how we think. Sometimes we sabotage ourselves with negative self-talk. "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so." Shakespeare was right on the money.

There are several styles of negative thinking that get us nowhere fast. Psychologists like to call them thought biases. Essentially, they are habits of thought so ingrained that we don't always recognize them easily in ourselves. Just as they've taken some time to develop, it also takes some time to identify them. However, change is possible. The first step is recognition.

Filtering

Sometimes people develop mental filters whereby receive selective parts of a message or communication. For example, if given feedback on a project, the person remembers the one piece of criticism rather than the ten points of praise.

Black and White Thinking

For someone who thinks in black and white, forget about the monochrome. Things are either good or bad, long or short, finished or not even started, fat or thin. There is no space for in-betweens and possibilities. This kind of thinking can make a person seem inflexible and stubborn.

Perfectionism

We probably all know someone who agonizes over the fine print and ensuring every detail is correct. Sometimes perfectionism is an asset, as it can lead to outstanding performance or work. However, it can also lead to a kind of paralysis. Worried that they won't do the job perfectly, the perfectionist doesn't start.

Catastrophizing

Some people are prone to thinking negatively. To catastrophize is to think of the worst possible outcome for a situation. Blowing things out of proportion can be hugely stressful and takes up a lot of energy.

Overgeneralization

"Typical!" is the catch-phrase of someone who overgeneralizes. They tend to take one rule of thought and apply it all too liberally. Other buzzwords that accompany overgeneralization are: always, everyone, every time, never.

For example, you may hear spouses argue, "You never do anything romantic" and, "I always do all of the housework." This type of thinking can lead to big arguments, because the person who over-generalizes often feels like they have little control over a situation or their lives, while the receiver becomes frustrated over the lack of evidence and fact.

Personalization

In this thinking style, a person assumes total responsibility for something even though it could have been completely outside of their control. When a person blames themselves or someone else for a situation, they may lose an objective perspective.

Negative Comparisons

This is when you measure yourself against other people and always come out the worse off. For example, Susie compares herself to her brother and thinks he is much smarter at everything.

Emotional Reasoning

If you are reasoning emotionally, you are believe everything you feel, even though those feeling might not be true. For example, thinking, 'I feel fat, therefore I must be fat.'

Blaming Others

Sometimes we don't want to take responsibility and blame others for how we are feeling. For example, Susie thinks that if other people included her more in activities, she wouldn't feel so isolated and lonely.

Call to Action: Find the Pattern

This exercise will help you to tune in to your mindset and factors that influence it. If completed regularly, it can elucidate situations and patterns of thinking that may be stopping you from achieving your goals.

Over the next week, chalk out time for a 5-10 minute reflection of your day. For each day, think about something which aroused strong emotions in you. Fill out the form as much as you can. Look again at the end of the week. Are the same thoughts and feelings cropping up?

Here is an example:

What was the situation?	What thoughts did you have?	How did you feel afterwards?	Can you identify the type of thinking?
I couldn't answer all the questions on a test.	Oh no, I've failed for sure.	Hopeless, self-critical.	Catastrophizing.

Key Points

- Thinking errors are patterns of every day thought that are overly negative.
- Many people with low self-esteem experience one or more type of thinking error.
- Recognizing your thought patterns which are unrealistic and unhelpful is the first step in changing them.

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