

What is helpful thinking?

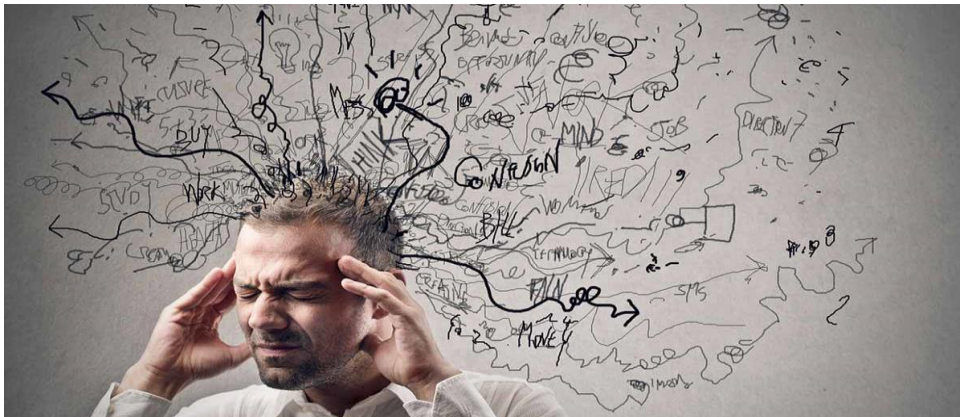


The way you think shapes how you feel about your life and yourself. You can't always influence what happens to you, but you can influence your thoughts so that you feel less overwhelmed and more hopeful. Helpful thinking will impact on your mood and influence your decisions and behaviour.

But helpful thinking is not the same thing as positive thinking. It's hard to be positive all the time, especially if you are coping with significant losses, change or stress. Helpful thinking is realistic thinking. An example of helpful thinking is, "this is a tough time for me, but I am doing some things well".

The impact of helpful and unhelpful thoughts

Unhelpful thoughts, such as 'absolutely nothing is going well', and 'things will never get any better' are likely to leave you feeling uptight, unhappy or even hopeless. Negative thinking can also put stress on relationships and make it hard for loved ones. If you tend to think in a negative way when something doesn't go to plan, your mood and reactions will probably be negative too. That's what makes negative thinking unhelpful.



How you feel and behave often depends on how you think about, or interpret, events in your life. Imagine that you are setting the table, and you drop a plate and it shatters.

- Helpful thinking would be something like: "These things happen, the plate was slippery."
- Unhelpful thinking would be something like: "I always stuff-up."

Negative over-reactions like this can lower your self-esteem, make you tense and angry, and make it more likely that you will have more unhelpful thoughts - a vicious spiral down.

The example below demonstrates how helpful and unhelpful thinking impacts on feelings and behaviour:

Event: Getting stuck in traffic

Thought: I'm going to be late and get in trouble.

Emotion: Anxiety.

Behaviour: Poor concentration, higher risk of accident. Arrive at work or appointment in stressed state.

Thought: Why do I always get stuck behind stupid drivers.

Emotion: Frustration.

Behaviour: Erratic, risky driving, possible road rage. Arrive at work or appointment in tense and stressed state.

Thought: I have a good excuse for missing the boring meeting.

Emotion: Relief.

Behaviour: Calmly enjoying music. Arrive at work or appointment in a relaxed state and in a good mood.

As easy as A-B-C?

Another way of thinking about the impact of helpful and unhelpful thinking is the simple A-B-C model. Antecedent (prior) events trigger Beliefs, which then in turn lead to Consequences.

Antecedent event:
Misplacing the car keys.

Beliefs: "I'm an idiot" or "Someone's taken the keys"

Consequences: Angry & Irritable
Inefficient & panicky search.

Beliefs: "They are here somewhere"

Consequences: Relaxed & efficient search.