



Overgeneralising

For the last couple of weeks as part of the Mental Health Notes, we have looked at common types of cognitive distortions – ‘Black and White Thinking’, ‘Mental Filter’ and ‘Jumping to Conclusions’. These unhelpful thinking patterns impact on how we think, feel and act. Today we will consider a fourth type of cognitive distortion – Overgeneralising.

Overgeneralising involves the use of **overly broad language** to evaluate people or events. The use of words like ‘always,’ ‘never,’ ‘everybody,’ and ‘nobody’ affects our thinking. Once we say something always happens to us, we start responding to the pattern of events instead of just the one event that has happened. Based on a single incident or piece of evidence you tend to come to a general conclusion. For example, you fail your driving test on the first attempt. You tell yourself that you’ll never pass it, you’ll never get a licence and you’ll have to walk everywhere or use public transport for life.

Imagine you have arranged to meet your friend and once again s/he is twenty minutes late. It may be a frustrating experience, but if your interpretation is ‘why does everyone always keep me waiting?’ your anger may increase because now you are not just frustrated by your friend, you are frustrated by everyone. People who overgeneralise tend to get angrier than those who use more realistic and accurate language.

There are some strategies that may help you avoid overgeneralising. Check the accuracy of your thoughts, for example, does everyone always keep you waiting? Or is it just this particular friend who always keeps you waiting? Sometimes, there are actual patterns of poor behaviour, and it is unhealthy to minimise those. For instance, if your friend is routinely late, it is completely reasonable to acknowledge that pattern and respond with frustration. If however your friend is often late, it is important to replace the thought - ‘why does **everyone** **always** keep me waiting?’ with something more accurate. Even a shift to ‘**this friend often** keeps me waiting’ can lead to a change in emotion.

Another strategy to help challenge overgeneralising is to recall times when a particular negative situation did not end up being a sign of things to come. If something happened once, does that really mean that it’s going to happen every time, or are other outcomes possible? For example, you pass your driving test on a subsequent attempt, which is a reminder that one single negative experience does not result in a pattern of failure.

As we progress through the current health crisis, it is important to recognise that the challenges we are facing affect many people in different ways. Unhelpful thinking patterns are very common. It is unrealistic to think that you can change your interpretation style overnight. Allow yourself time to practice some of these strategies to move towards a more helpful thinking style.