Unhelpful Thought Patterns
(Cognitive Distortions)

When we are stressed or distressed, we can become less aware of our thought processes and tend to think and act on auto-pilot. Becoming more aware of your thoughts at times of stress and distress is an important step towards developing more helpful responses and relationship patterns and to feeling better. The following list is abridged from the work of Aaron Beck (1976) and David Burns (1980) and identifies the common unhelpful thought patterns that can maintain, generate and reinforce negative beliefs about self and others and maintain, generate and strengthen negative emotional states.

All unhelpful thoughts or cognitive distortions are patterns of thinking/believing that are a) false or inaccurate and b) can lead to unhelpful consequences such as conflicts in relationships, poor decision-making, low confidence/self-esteem and disturbed emotions.

Unhelpful Thought Pattern	Description
All-or-Nothing Thinking	Tendency to see things only in extremes with no grey areas or degrees. For example, "If I am less than totally safe, I am totally unsafe" Also referred to as "Black-and-White Thinking."
Mental Filter	Positive information is excluded (filtered out), thoughts are dominated by negative information and sometimes just one example, "I never get anything right" after a single small mistake. All the times you did get things right are ignored; "I am going to get the sack" from focusing on one negative comment from your boss and all the positive feedback is ignored. Similar to over-generalisation.
Over-Generalisation	Taking one negative event as evidence that everything is negative and generalising it to an overall pattern. For example, believing you are a complete failure after not coming first in one test/competition, when you have come first or won on multiple previous occasions.
Mind-Reading (Jumping to Conclusions)	Going straight to a negative guess about what others are thinking, with little or no evidence. For example, you see someone who looks cross and assume "They are cross with me and think I'm useless". We cannot mind-read, we don't know what others are thinking unless they tell us and even then, they may not be being truthful. It is unhelpful to guess/mind-read, especially when guesses lead to negative assumptions. Related to Fortune-Telling.
Fortune-Telling (Jumping to Conclusions)	Thinking you have the power to know what is going to happen in the future. For example, "I will always be alone and never meet anyone." Fortune-telling is making predictions about the future with little to no evidence and believing them to be unquestionable truth. This can sometimes turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Related to Mind-Reading.
Discounting the Positive	Positive experience/feedback is disbelieved/ignored/dismissed. For example, on receiving praise at work, saying/thinking "Anyone could have done that." or "They don't mean it." Negative experience/ feedback is wholly believed/accepted without question.

Magnification (Catastrophising) and Minimisation	Magnifying negative and minimising positive elements in situations and/or in the self. Negative information is exaggerated and blown out of proportion, also known as 'catastrophising', and positive information is completely overshadowed by this and reduced to being tiny, invisible or meaningless.
Should Statements	Tyrannical demands that you, others and/or the world *must* be some other way than they actually are, expressed in too many moral imperatives, for example, "I should ...", "I have to ...", "I must ..." or applied to others "You should …" etc. This imposes expectations on self and/or others that may be difficult/impossible to achieve, leading to guilt/feelings of failure in relation to self-expectations and resentment/ anger towards others when they disappoint us by not meeting our tyrannical or unrealistic demands/expectations.
Emotional Reasoning	Wrongly assuming that negative emotions are facts and a wholly reliable, totally accurate guide to reality. For example, "I feel bad, therefore I must be bad". This circular reasoning confuses feelings for facts when inner feelings are not facts and actually very unreliable sources of information about the outside world.
Labelling	Extreme form of over-generalisation. Making a negative judgement about self or a situation, then attaching an unhelpful label. For example, not getting a job means "I am a total failure" or the customer who did not tip you "They are nasty". An unhelpful/negative labels can lead to emotional distress as our reactions are largely a result of how we judge or 'label' ourselves and situations.
Personalisation	Taking things personally, holding yourself responsible/to blame for events that are outside your control and not related to you. It can be egocentric/immature to assume events relate to the self when in reality there may be no connection. For example, "Those two people laughed as I walked past, they were laughing at me".
Control Fallacies	Believing either you have no control over anything and a complete victim of fate/helpless, or you are completely in control and responsible for everything even the feelings of those around you. Both beliefs are damaging and inaccurate. Everyone has some control even, if that is just how they respond to situations, and no one is responsible for other people's feelings nor can anyone be in complete control no matter how much they might want or try to be.
Fairness Fallacy	The world is not a fair place, the assumption that the world is or should be fair can lead to disappointment and negative feelings when faced with the evidence of life's unfairness. People who succumb to the fairness fallacy may end up feeling frustrated, angry and resentful.
Change Fallacy	Expecting that others will be able to change if we can be persuasive enough or put enough pressure on them, directly or indirectly. This distortion is more common in people who believe their happiness relies on other people and them changing is the only way they will get their needs met. For example, a woman who believes "If my husband talked to me more about his feelings, I would not shout and hit him so much."

Always Being Right	The person who believes that they must always be 'right' and being 'wrong' or admitting they are 'wrong' is unbearable. They can go to extreme lengths to prove they are 'right', even when there is no objective measure of 'right or wrong'. For example, the internet commenters who engage in lengthy arguments, or people who have intellectual battles, which must be won at all costs. They cannot ' agree to disagree' but must defeat/annihilate the opposing view.
Just Reward (Karma) Fallacies	This manifests as a belief that hard work, sacrifice and suffering will pay-off with a 'just reward' of getting what is wanted in the end. Unfortunately, this is not true, there are many examples of people who, no matter how hard they have worked and sacrificed, do not get what they want in the end. The similar belief is that those who lie or abuse others will get a 'just punishment' via karma. Again, sometimes no matter how badly someone has behaved or treated others, they get away with it and there is no 'justice'. These distortions are linked to the Fairness Fallacy.