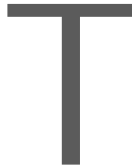


Chapter 13

**Challenging Your
Distorted Thinking**



*All 'graduations' in human development mean
the abandonment of a familiar position...
all growth...must come to terms with this fact.*

-Erik H. Erikson

In this chapter we'll examine how a particular style of thinking can act as a stressor. The particular style of thinking that I'm referring to is *distorted thinking*. Distorted thinking is a self-sabotaging habit of thinking in which you interpret reality in an unreal way. As a result of interpreting reality in an unreal way, you alter reality, narrow your viewpoint of reality, and/or cut yourself off from reality altogether.

Styles of distorted thinking tend to be judgmental. They label people. They inaccurately evaluate a circumstance. Styles of distorted thinking generalize your assessment of a singular circumstance to each and every circumstance that resembles the singular experience that you've assessed. As a result, special circumstances and characteristics are seldom factored into your assessment of the original singular circumstance. This makes your assessment of a current circumstance that's similar to a previous experience vulnerable to being inaccurate and imprecise. When you apply distorted thinking to the evaluation of a current circumstance inaccuracies occur because distorted thinking limits you to seeing only one side of a circumstance.

There can be nothing more dangerous to your long-term abstinence than to misinterpret reality or to be cut-off from reality altogether. The danger posed to you and your abstinence is enormous when you've misinterpreted or been cut-off from reality. To successfully remain clean and sober you must be accurately grounded to each moment of your day. You can't afford to misinterpret the meaning of any given circumstance. You can't afford to misinterpret the affect that a circumstance has on you. For if you misjudge the meaning of a given circumstance,

you're all the more likely to misjudge what the next right action should be to cope with the circumstance that you're confronted with.

To insure that your styles of distorted thinking don't activate the process of relapse, you must:

- 1) Acknowledge that distorted thinking exists.
- 2) Identify what your styles of distorted thinking are.
- 3) Identify how these distorted styles of thinking manifest in your thoughts.
- 4) Learn how to dispute the distorted thinking and the conclusions that you make as a result.

In this chapter we'll examine the following three styles of distorted thinking.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Styles of distorted thinking that adversely affect your psychological well-being.

- 1) Overgeneralization
- 2) Polarized thinking
- 3) Catastrophizing

The first style of distorted thinking I want to discuss is *overgeneralization*. Overgeneralization is a style of thinking in which you take one fact or one event, make a general rule from that one fact, and generalize that rule to every circumstance that resembles the circumstance from which the rule was made. For example:

- 1) You ask somebody to be your sponsor. The person who you ask to be your sponsor says, "No." You conclude from this singular event, "No one will ever want to be my sponsor."

- 2) You go to a Recovery-based support group meeting and you find yourself bored. You weren't able to relate to the speaker and so you didn't get anything from the meeting. You conclude from this singular event, "All meetings are boring and Recovery-based support groups will never have anything to offer me."
- 3) You pray to your Higher Power but you don't feel like you experienced a connection. You conclude from this singular event, "This always happens to me. Things never work out for me the way they do for everybody else. I should stop going to meetings because I'll never be able to do this right."
- 4) You ask your friend to not smoke reefer when they're around you. Your friend responds to your request by saying, "There's nothing worse than a reformed anything. If that's the way you're going to be, then we don't have to see each other anymore." You conclude from this singular event, "My therapist doesn't know a thing about what I should tell my friends. I knew that it would never be safe to communicate my Recovery-based needs to my friends. From now on I'll keep my big mouth shut and let people drink and smoke whatever they want whenever they're around me."
- 5) You express to your life partner how difficult staying clean and sober is and they respond to you by ridiculing you and telling you to stop being so weak. You conclude from this singular event, "Nobody wants to hear me go on and on about what's bothering me. This is the last time I ask anybody to hear me out about what I'm feeling."

In each example, you had one experience and based on that one experience, you generalized what will happen to you every time you repeat that experience and experiences like that for the rest of your life. You can see how overgeneralization is a set-up for discouragement, hopelessness, procrastination, avoidance, and ultimately giving-up.

As you [re]construct your Recovery-based lifestyle, you will constantly be put in new situations that may not turn out for you the way that you hope it will. Do not allow yourself to overgeneralize from one singular experience that things will always occur the way that they occurred in any one singular event.

How can you prevent yourself from overgeneralizing. First be mindful of the following buzz words that may indicate that you're overgeneralizing.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Buzz words that indicate that you're involved in the distorted thinking style of overgeneralization.

- 1) All
- 2) Always
- 3) Everybody
- 4) Everyone
- 5) Never
- 6) No one
- 7) Nobody
- 8) None

When you find your thoughts dominated by these words, you've likely taken the outcome of a singular situ-

ation and made an overgeneralization based on that singular outcome. When you find yourself overgeneralizing based upon a limited experience(s), you need to step back from your thinking, think about what you've concluded, challenge what you've concluded, and reformulate your original conclusion.

Pathfinder's Compass

Ways to challenge your overgeneralizations.

- 1) Question your generalization(s). Is it really possible that nobody will ever want to be my sponsor?
- 2) Try to explain how your experience may be limited to a specific time and place. He may have been sponsoring more people than he can handle.
- 3) Ask yourself what you can do in the future to make the outcome different. Ask other people at my meeting who might have the time and the willingness to sponsor me.

Pathfinder's Exercise

- 1) Write about or discuss a negative experience that you had when you attended a Recovery-based support group meeting.
- 2) Write about or discuss what conclusions you drew from the experience that you identified in step #1 of this exercise.
- 3) Write about or discuss how you may have created an overgeneralization from the conclusion that you identified in step #2 of this exercise.
- 4) Write about or discuss how you applied the over-

- generalization identified in step #3 of this exercise.
- 5) Write about or discuss what impact the application of the overgeneralization identified in step #3 of this exercise has had on the [re]construction and preservation of your Recovery-based lifestyle.
 - 6) Write about or discuss what impact the application of the overgeneralization identified in step #3 of this exercise has had on your abstinence.
 - 7) Write about or discuss what impact the application of the overgeneralization identified in step #3 of this exercise has had on your spiritual practice.

Polarized thinking is the second style of distorted thinking I want to discuss with you. Polarized thinking is a style of thinking in which you divide your experiences into all-or-nothing or black-or-white. When this occurs you tend to divide your experiences into either/or dichotomies. This means that when you're evaluating yourself, another person, or a circumstance you see what you're evaluating in only one of two ways—good or bad, kind or evil, smart or stupid, a success or a failure. The truth is that more times than not who or what you're evaluating is a combination of many qualities and characteristics but never solely one or the other.

Polarized thinking poses a danger to your Recovery-based lifestyle because you inevitably wind-up evaluating yourself, other people, and/or circumstances in a negative way. Why would that be so? Let's face it, you're going to run into experiences that won't go your way. You can't be perfect all of the time. People can't be kind to you all of the time. You can't know everything all of the time. Mistakes will be made. Old behaviors, beliefs, and think-

ing will rear their ugly head.

And if all you can do is view yourself, other people, and circumstances as only positive or negative, good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate, once you have a negative encounter with an individual or once you struggle with a circumstance, or once you acknowledge a negative quality about yourself, you'll evaluate yourself, other people, or that circumstance in a negative light. The problem with negative evaluations is that negativity breeds fear, discouragement, and apathy. These are three emotions that you do not have the luxury to indulge. So it's critical that your evaluation of each circumstance be grounded in reality, not the distorted thinking of polarized thinking.

How can you tell that polarized thinking is infecting your thoughts? What's the key to recognizing that you're using polarized thinking to evaluate yourself, other people, and circumstances? Listen for the either/or, all or nothing, or black or white tone to your thoughts.

Once you begin to recognize the either/or, all or nothing, or black or white tone to your thoughts, you can challenge your thinking about a specific circumstance. Question your conclusions. Expand what you're thinking by collecting more data. Below are five ways that you can challenge your polarized thinking.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Ways to challenge polarized thinking.

- 1) Tell yourself that nothing is totally all or totally nothing.
- 2) Ask yourself what's the middle ground in what I am thinking right now.

- 3) Tell yourself that nothing's absolutely one way or the other.
- 4) Ask yourself what's the gray in my black and white thinking.
- 5) Ask yourself what percentage of this circumstance is black, what percentage of this circumstance is white, and what percentage of this circumstance are different shades of gray.

Pathfinder's Exercise

Use any one of the five strategies for challenging polarized thinking from the above Pathfinder's Checklist for the following examples of polarized thinking.

- 1) *I don't comment at meetings because if I say something stupid, people will think I'm stupid.* This is an example of polarized thinking. You assume that if you say one stupid thing, that everything about you is stupid. You assume that people who say something stupid can only be thought of as stupid. What strategy or combination of strategies can you apply from the above Pathfinder's Checklist to dispute your thinking in this example?
- 2) *I can't ask my friends to stop drinking when I'm with them. If I ask them to stop drinking when I am with them, they won't want to hang around me.* This is an example of polarized thinking. You assume that the only reason that your friends are your friends is because you and them drink together. You assume that you have nothing more to offer your friends than to be a drinking buddy. You assume that if you ask them not to drink around

you, there won't be any other basis for your friendship. What strategy or combination of strategies can you apply from the above Pathfinder's Checklist to dispute your thinking in this example?

- 3) *I can't leave the wedding early and go to a meeting if I'm feeling uncomfortable because my wife will think I'm weak, and just trying to get out of staying at the wedding.* This is an example of polarized thinking. You assume that needing support when you're having a hard time makes you a weak person. You assume that people who need support are weak. You assume that people who don't ask for support are strong. You assume that your wife will see you only as a person who is weak or only as a person who tries to get out of things. What strategy or combination of strategies can you apply from the above Pathfinder's Checklist to dispute your thinking in this example?
- 4) *I can stop using cocaine but my husband wants me to keep drinking so that I will still be his party girl. I can't risk losing him because I've stopped drinking.* This is an example of polarized thinking. You assume that your husband stays with you because of who you are when you drink. You assume that the only interest that he has in you is who you are when you drink. You assume that the only thing you have to offer him is being a party girl. What strategy or combination of strategies can you apply from the above Pathfinder's Checklist to dispute your thinking in this example?
- 5) *I can't go to a meeting every day for the next ninety days. I have a life. I have responsibilities. What will*

my friends think about me if I go to ninety meetings in ninety days? They'll think I've flipped out. This is an example of polarized thinking. You assume that you can only live your life or only go to meetings. You assume that people who go to meetings are crazy. You assume that the only way to view somebody who goes to ninety meetings in ninety days is negatively.

Catastrophizing is the third style of thinking distortion that I want to discuss with you. When you catastrophize, you assume that the worst will happen as a result of something that you do, think, or say.

Of course the problem with catastrophizing is that your conclusions are not reality based. Catastrophizing occurs when your fears influence your thoughts. But unfortunately, once you adopt catastrophizing as a way of thinking, your catastrophic thoughts become your reality. The problem with making your catastrophic thoughts your reality is that you become paralyzed with fear. You refuse to take action for fear of what your actions will bring. And with catastrophic thinking, what your actions will bring is always assumed to be hurt, pain, and regret. There's nothing more dangerous to your long-term abstinence than to be scared into inaction because, as you well know by now, the most important part of staying clean and sober is *doing the next right thing*.

Pathfinder's Checklist

Examples of catastrophizing.

- 1) If I go to Recovery-based support group meetings people are going to think that I'm messed up.
- 2) If I don't let people drink alcohol in my house, people will think I'm selfish and won't want to be my friend.
- 3) I'll go out of my mind if I don't have a drink.
- 4) God will punish me if I don't treat my husband better.
- 5) I'll wind up all alone if I stop using cocaine.
- 6) Nobody will love me if I admit that I have a problem with heroin.
- 7) Everyone will hate me if I ask them to leave early so that I can get to a meeting.

Pathfinder's Exercise

For each statement written below, write at least three sentences that offer an alternative outcome for the proposed action. Using the first statement below as an example, what else might people think about you if you went to a Recovery-based support group meeting? What else?

- 1) If I go to a Recovery-based support group meeting people will think I'm messed up.
- 2) If I don't let people drink alcohol in my house, people are going to think that I'm selfish.
- 3) I'll go out of my mind if I don't have a drink.
- 4) God will punish me if I don't treat my husband better.
- 5) I'll wind up all alone if I stop using cocaine.

- 6) Nobody will love me if I admit I have a problem with heroin.
- 7) Everybody will hate me if I ask them to leave early so that I can get to a meeting.

Your styles of distorted thinking pose a danger to your abstinence because they warp, distort, and cut you off from reality. When your perception of a circumstance is warped by one or more of your styles of distorted thinking, it's unlikely that you'll respond to a person or circumstance in an appropriate manner that effectively resolves the circumstance.

Therein lies the problem. For if your response to a situation is inappropriate or insufficient, the issue will linger. As the problem remains unresolved, the emotional and spiritual pain that you experience from the unresolved problem will linger as well. And that's nothing more than a formula for becoming overwhelmed. When that occurs the next likely event to take place is the activation of the process of relapse.

By becoming more sensitized to how your style of thinking distorts your evaluation of a person or a circumstance, you'll be much better able to challenge the conclusions you draw and how you apply those conclusions to other similar circumstances that you encounter. The more adept you become at challenging the thinking that's inspired by your style of distorted thinking, the much better able you'll be to resolve situations rather than having them fester. And that's nothing but good news when it comes to staying clean and sober.