

Unhelpful cognitive patterns are collections of thoughts you have had likely hundreds, maybe even thousands, of times over the years. Due to this frequency, the thoughts occur **automatically** and unconsciously. Because these thoughts often occur during **stressful** or emotional times, the thoughts are likely **distorted and irrational**. Therefore, **fact-checking** these thoughts is **imperative**, so we ensure we are operating from a rational, objective, and **truthful** place.

Catastrophic Thinking-

Ex: “I was the worst one in studio class; I will never get a job.”

Ex: “I am so nervous; I will probably perform terribly and then get kicked out of school.”

WHY: We **do not** like or feel comfortable with uncertainty. Writing **catastrophic** stories helps us avoid the discomfort of the unknown because we trick ourselves into believing we’ve figured out what the future holds. Additionally, we **do** like feeling prepared, even if it means we are preparing for a catastrophic future. By writing **fictional** stories about our future, we **temporarily** feel more at ease.

TOOL:

+Seek **balance** in your catastrophic thoughts, so that for every catastrophic story you write, you also write a more reasonable story. We are **not trying to replace** the catastrophic thought, we are just trying to balance it.

Catastrophic thought: “I was the worst one in studio class; I will never get a job.”

Realistic thought: “There were parts of my performance I want to work on and there were parts of my performance that went well.”

Realistic thought: “It may take some more experience and time to get a job than I originally planned for and **that is ok.**”

Assumptions-

Ex: “The conductor looked at me weirdly during my solo, they must hate my playing.”

Ex: “My friend hasn’t texted me back, they must be mad at me.”

WHY: Similar to the function of catastrophic thoughts, **assumptions trick us** into a sense of certainty. Believe it or not, we would rather assume something bad about ourselves than exist in uncertainty. Additionally, we all have inherent **negative bias**: as humans, we naturally orient our perspective towards the negative aspects of a performance or interaction. Therefore, it is easy to miss other parts of an experience, which then **skews our perception** of an experience.

TOOLS:

+Using the word **MAYBE**: “The conductor looked at me weirdly, **MAYBE** they hate my playing.”

+Become a skilled story writer: practice writing alternatives to your assumption. “Maybe my friend is mad at me.” “Maybe they are in a rehearsal and haven’t looked at their phone.”

All-or-nothing-

Ex: This person hurt me and therefore they must not love me.

Ex: I don’t have time to practice 3 hours today, so I won’t practice at all.

Ex: If I’m not giving 1000% to everything I do, I am lazy.

WHY: Humans are naturally drawn to a **binary way of thinking**, i.e. all-or-nothing/black-and-white thought patterns. We are not accustomed to considering what exists in the middle, or the gray area. For example, feeling sad feels contradictory to feeling happy, **so our brain forces us to choose**. This is extremely **limiting**, however, because our experiences are filled with contradictions and nuance.

TOOLS:

+Build **tolerance** of the gray area: practice holding 2 opposite feelings/thoughts at one time.

+Replace **BUT** with **AND**: “But” sometimes minimizes the fact that two opposite things can be true once, whereas “and” gives us more space to hold 2 conflicting things at once.

Magnification and Minimization-

Magnification: “I made some mistakes, so it **doesn’t matter** other parts went well.”

Minimization: “I only placed well in the competition because there weren’t a lot of applicants.”

WHY: These thought patterns reflect our inherent **negative bias** (see above). Additionally, these kinds of thoughts may help us feel like we’re maintaining high standards for our performances, or that we’re being humble. However, these **unhelpful** thought patterns do not reflect anything about either of those things- they only **skew** the objectivity of the experience.

TOOL:

+Being **present** is one of the most **powerful interventions** when it comes to unhelpful cognitive patterns. Often, unhelpful thoughts are related to the past (“I performed so badly the other day,”) or the future (“I will never get a job”). However, when we are **intentional** about our thoughts reflecting the **present moment**, our thinking will be more **truthful**. “Right now, I am feeling bad about some parts of my recent performance **AND** as I work on these parts right now, they sound better than before.”

Intrusive thoughts-

Ex: I’m about to mess this passage up.

Ex: I sound terrible.

Ex: I feel so awkward, I bet everyone thinks I’m weird.

WHY: Sometimes, our thoughts are simply lies and because we bypass fact-checking our thoughts, we end up spending a lot of energy overthinking things that aren’t even true!

TOOLS:

+**Is that thought 100 % true?** Ex: “I sound terrible,” v. “That note didn’t come out exactly how I wanted this time.”

+Add “**The thought I am having**” before the intrusive thought; this helps **separate** the thought out, which will provide a more **objective** experience of the thought. “The thought I’m having is that everyone thinks I’m weird.”

+What is your supporting **data**? Do you have **evidence** supporting the intrusive thought? Is this data **skewed** in any way?

Learning how to **change the way you think** starts with self-awareness: how many times can you **notice** yourself engaging in unhelpful patterns of thought? As you **deepen your awareness** around how you think, you can then start to practice intervening on thought patterns that aren’t serving you. Fortunately, the brain has **neuroplasticity**, so we KNOW it is possible to create new neural pathways. However, this takes time and practice, and not something that will happen overnight or even the 1st 100 times you do it.

The new thoughts **won’t feel true at first** and that is normal- **consistent repetition** is the only way to reinforce the **truthfulness** of these newer ways of thinking.

Live Full Therapy

<https://www.livefulltherapy.com/>

SoundMind Musician

<https://www.soundmindmusician.org/>

YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/@AliciaEnstrom>

Here, I have uploaded several short videos on specific mental health issues musicians often face.

