

7 uncovering your thinking traps

There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.

—William Shakespeare

for you to know

Your mind-set, or the way you choose to think about things, is very powerful. Remember Lisa in activity 3? She was strong in her academic grit, but her social grit was weaker, partly because she was *thinking* about each domain with her two different minds. Lisa viewed academic challenges as learning opportunities and steps toward her long-term goal of going to college. But when she faced a social challenge, she was more likely to think, *I will always feel awkward and uncomfortable, so I might as well just stay home*. Her mind-set kept the costs of social encounters—the stress of striking up conversations, the potential for embarrassment—front and center. In terms of her social grit, Lisa was falling into *common thinking traps*, or what psychologist Albert Ellis calls “irrational thoughts.” Irrational thoughts or thinking traps were preventing Lisa from reaching her goal.

Common thinking traps include:

- **Demandingness—Shoulds/Musts!** The belief that things and conditions absolutely must be the way you want them to be. This belief often features words like *should, must, have to, need, and ought*. For example, *This should not be so hard!* or, *My friends should not be acting that way.*
- **Aufzulizing—It Is Terrible!** The belief that situations and/or events are awful, terrible, or catastrophic. For example, *Making a mistake is the worst thing ever!* or *I will never be able to finish this chapter!*

- **Low Frustration Tolerance—I Can't Stand It!** The belief that struggle is unbearable and must be avoided at all costs. For example, *If no one talks to me at the party, I will just die!*
- **Global Rating of Self/Others; Self-Downing.** The belief that we can be defined by one negative aspect. For example, *If I get a bad grade on my social studies test, there is something wrong with me.*²¹

Do any of these thinking traps sound familiar? When you find yourself falling into a thinking trap, ask yourself:

- What is the evidence that what I'm thinking is true?
- How is this thinking helpful?
- What would I say to a friend who was thinking this way?

This may lead you to realize that your irrational thoughts are not true, not helpful, and not the way you would advise a good friend who is in the same situation.

Now, instead, let's develop rational ways of thinking that can help you think grittier as you work toward a long-term goal:

- **Wishes/Preferences:** A wish or preference is softer and more flexible than a *should*. It can be the desire to have things the way you would like without demanding that it must be so. For example, *I wish this wasn't so hard for me, but "shoulding" on myself doesn't solve anything.*
- **Living in the Gray:** The belief that while an event might be inconvenient, it is not awful. For example, *Although no one likes to get a bad grade, it's not the worst thing that could happen.*
- **High Frustration Tolerance/I Can Stand It:** The belief that while we may dislike something, we can actually stand it. For example, *I may not like it, but I can stand it!*
- **Unconditional Self-Acceptance:** The belief that we are more than just one negative aspect of ourselves. For example, *I messed up on that science test, but I am not a worthless human being.*

for you to do

Keeping your grit goal in mind:

1. Think about a time when you fell into a thinking trap. Write down a sentence that reflects your irrational thoughts. For example, *Writing is so hard, I just can't stand it.*

2. Circle the thinking trap(s) you used.

Demandingness—Shoulds/Musts

Awfulizing—It Is Terrible!

Low Frustration Tolerance—I Can't Stand It!

Global Rating of Self/Others; Self-Downing

3. Now try to challenge those thinking traps by asking yourself:

What is the evidence that what I am thinking is true?

How is this thinking helpful?

What would I say to a friend who was thinking this way?

4. See if you can come up with a way of thinking that is both rational and helpful. For example, *I wish writing wasn't so hard for me, but I can stand it.*

5. Circle the rational/helpful thoughts you used.

Wishes/ Preferences

Living in the Gray

High Frustration Tolerance/ I Can Stand It

Unconditional Self-Acceptance

6. When you used rational thinking to address your grit goal, did you feel more inspired and more likely to persevere?

Yes Not yet