

Helpful Thinking Handout



After a disaster you might develop extreme, all black or white ways of seeing yourself and the world, such as seeing yourself as “completely” unable to handle your situation, or seeing the world as “totally” unsafe. While understandable, these habits can make your situation even more difficult to deal with by making you feel overwhelmed or hopeless. People rarely take the time to examine what they are thinking, so unhelpful thoughts just keep happening more or less automatically.

You may find it helpful to become more aware of these unhelpful thoughts and consider whether there are more **helpful** thoughts to focus on to make it easier to deal with your situation. While your thoughts may be fairly accurate (for example, another flood is likely to occur sometime in the future), the unspoken assumption that you will not be able to handle the next flood is the unhelpful part of the thought. Below are categories of unhelpful thoughts that are common after a disaster, and how these thoughts may make you feel, as well as more helpful thoughts with which to replace them. Once you identify some of the thoughts, **the key to helpful thinking is to practice helpful thoughts often** during your daily life.

Common Unhelpful Thoughts	Resulting Emotion	Alternate Helpful Thoughts	New Emotional Response
COPING			
“I should be coping better.”	Helpless Incompetent Fearful	“The fact I got here today proves I am coping a bit.” “Talking to a counselor helps me to cope better.” “Most people would have trouble after an event like this.”	Less fearful More hopeful Less helpless Stronger Competent Open to seeking support/help
“My reactions mean I am going crazy.” “Something must be really wrong with me.”	Fearful Worthless Pessimistic	“These reactions are only temporary.” “Most people have these reactions after a disaster.”	Reassured Capable Hopeful
“Other people are dealing with this better than I am, so what’s wrong with me?” “Only weak people react the way I do.”	Worthless	“Most people react this way for a while.” “My reaction reflects how big this event was, not how weak I am.”	Reassured Capable Stronger

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HELPLESSNESS & CONTROL			
"Things will never be the same again."	Sad Regretful Hopeless	"Feeling really bad usually doesn't last forever." "Thinking like this makes it difficult to plan for the future." "Not everything will be as before. But some things are the same now."	Open to the future Hopeful Accepting
"I have no control over anything."	Helpless Not caring, giving up Confused Frustrated	"I can control some decisions about my future." "Doing things gives me a greater sense of control." "Talking to a counselor shows I have some control."	Purposeful Hopeful, competent Open to setting goals, taking steps Less helpless
SAFETY			
"The world is a dangerous place."	Fearful Worried Distrustful	"The world can offer good possibilities." "The world is not always dangerous." "There are good people as well as bad in the world." "Most of the time I am safe."	Hopeful Open to a better future Trusting that people will help Calmer
"I can't trust anyone."	Lonely Withdrawn Suspicious Sad	"Trusting people has led to me getting help." "I don't need to be mistrustful of everyone." "I can choose some people to trust."	More trusting, less suspicious Hopeful Optimistic
"I'm not safe."	Worried Fearful Insecure	"Feeling unsafe isn't the same as being unsafe." "This bad thing has happened, but it doesn't mean it will happen again."	More relaxed Confident, competent More secure

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GUILT			
"I am a bad person for letting this happen."	Guilty Worthless Self-loathing	"A bad person would not be feeling guilty about this." "It is because I care so much that I feel bad that it happened to people I love."	Blameless Worthy Self-accepting
"I should have prevented this."	Guilty Worthless, blaming Frustrated Upset	"Nobody could have prevented this." "I can't always protect others/family."	Self-accepting Worthy, blameless
"I should have done more."	Guilty Frustrated Upset	"At the time I did the best I could." "I wouldn't expect anyone else to have done more than I did."	Able to move on Reduced distress Self-accepting
BLAME & ANGER			
"It is unfair."	Angry Vengeful	"This could have happened to anyone." "Sometimes bad things happen to good people."	Understanding Realistic Accepting
"It's their fault this happened."	Angry Frustrated Vengeful Blaming Mistrustful	"Blaming people doesn't change my situation." "Others may be to blame, but I need to focus energy on myself and family."	Accepting Optimistic More trusting More able to move on