**CHAPTER 2 PERSONAL BARRIERS**

*Man is an emotional animal, occasionally rational; and through his feelings he can be deceived to his heart’s content*.

—*WILL DURANT, MANSIONS OF PHILOSOPHY*

Who we are is how we think. Where and how we were raised may determine whether we are pessimists or optimists, conservatives or liberals, atheists or theists, idealists or realists. Our upbringing shapes our fears, which keep us from facing thoughts. It shapes our self-concept, which moves us to defend our thoughts. And it shapes our emotions, which can distort our thinking to an exceptional degree. In this and in other ways our psychological world, shaped by our exposure to cultural and genetic forces, often acts as a barrier to sound thinking. In this chapter we learn about these barriers so that we can diffuse some of their negative influence on our thinking. But this requires that we face ourselves honestly and completely, so that we can discover the personal factors that inhibit our thinking. Unless we face the fact of who we really are, we will not become the sound thinkers we are meant to be.

**ENCULTURATION**

Imagine for a moment that you have the genetic constitution you have now but were raised by parents in another country. Imagine how you would be different. If you were raised in India, you would probably be of Hindu faith, believe in reincarnation, and be familiar with many gods and goddesses, such as Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Krishna, and Rama. Or perhaps you would be of the Jain religion, revering animal life so much that you would never eat meat and would even sweep insects out of your house instead of killing them. If you were raised by parents in Iran, you would probably despise American capitalism and revere Muhammad above Jesus. If you were a man in the Sambian tribe of New Guinea, you would likely engage in homosexual behavior until you were married. And if you were a woman in the Mbuti tribe in Africa, you would feel comfortable roaming your community in nothing but a loincloth. Even your taste preference is subject to cultural forces. In America, your favorite pizza topping might be sausage and mushroom, but in Japan it would probably be squid, in England tuna and corn, and in India pickled ginger. In sum, many of the values and preferences you have now, including religious ideas, sexual mores, and work ethic, were instilled in you since birth by your culture. This process, called *enculturation*, is going on continually, even now, no matter what your age. What does this have to do with thinking? Just this: The extent to which you are able to think critically about ideas that conflict with your basic attitudes and values is inversely related to the extent to which you are enculturated. If you accept only your enculturated notions of the world without resisting them, challenging them, thinking critically about them, you become a “logical egoist” a term used by Kant for close-minded people who are so sure of the correctness of their ideas that they see no reason to test them against the intellect of others. Ben Franklin seems to cite an example of this:

* But though many private persons think almost as highly of their own infallibility as of that of their sect, few express it so naturally as a certain French lady who, in a dispute with her sister, said: “I don’t know how it happens, Sister, but I meet with nobody but myself that is*always* in the right.” (Franklin, [**1945**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib69), pp. 681–82)

**Sources of Enculturation**

Enculturation has many different sources or influences. One of the major influences is the family in which we grow up. There we learn our religious beliefs, ethical standards, prejudices and stereotypes, eating habits, and worldview. The two great depth psychologists of the twentieth century, for example, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, accused each other of being negatively influenced by their family background. Jung accused Freud of establishing a negative psychology because he was Jewish, while Freud accused Jung of being blinded by his strong religious background, which prevented him from accepting sexual maladjustment as the root cause of neurosis (Puner, [**1947**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib145)). The twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell saw Immanuel Kant’s moral argument for the existence of God as rooted “in the maxims that he had imbibed at his mother’s knee” (Russell, [**1957**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib167), p. 11), and Will Durant wrote of the influence of Martin Luther’s parents, who pushed him into the cloistered life through their repeated thrashing of him during youth, and who passed to him their vision of a hard, strict God and their beliefs in witches, elves, angels, and demons (Durant, [**1957**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib55), p. 341).

Another source of enculturation is our place of work. Here we may learn certain manners of behavior, dress code, professional ethics, and work attitude. The city in which we grow up can also be a strong source of enculturation. Some cities are known for wine and theater, others for beer and brats. Some cities tend to develop men with a lot of machismo, whereas others allow more tolerance for androgyny. In Milwaukee they may prefer Miller Beer, in Denver they may have a strong preference for Coors, and in Munich it may be Lowenbrau. Are the taste buds of citizens in these cities different? Or have the citizens learned to prefer one over the other? And what do you suppose the residents of Detroit think about Japanese automobiles? In the United States we can also find differences in enculturation between northerners and southerners. Southern males, for example, think differently about the use of violence in self-protection and honor (Nisbett and Cohen, [**1996**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib135)). In sum, how we think about masculinity, violence, food and drink, sex, God, and most other things is often a matter of enculturation. The more we examine these enculturation effects on ourselves, the more we can think more objectively, more independently, more clearly about various matters in the world.

**THINK ABOUT IT:**

*Can you think of other differences in behaviors, values, and ideas between people in the northern and southern sections of the United States? What about the eastern and western sections?*

**SOME COMMON AMERICAN BELIEFS**

* **1.** *It’s okay to kill animals*. The Jains of India consider it sinful to kill even insects.
* **2.** *It’s morally wrong to go outside without clothing, no matter where you live*. Women in the Netherlands feel quite comfortable gardening in their backyard topless. And many tribes in Africa, of course, go without clothing or wear very little of it.
* **3.** *Intentionally deforming the body is sick*. It was once traditional in China to wrap the feet of young girls for years to keep the feet abnormally small. Such abnormality was considered a mark of beauty. And in some tribes in Africa, deforming the lips and ears, making them abnormally large, is also considered a mark of beauty. Perhaps deformation of the body is no longer considered “sick” by most Americans. Consider: In the United States most women, and some men, put holes in their ears; most males have the foreskin of their penis removed; and many thousands of women each year have surgery to enlarge their breasts. Maybe what is considered “sick” is only those deformations that are not done in one’s own culture.
* **4.** *There is only one God*. This monotheism is characteristic of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Most other religions are polytheistic.
* **5.** *Jesus is God*. People of Jewish and Islamic faith would certainly disagree with this.
* **6.** *The Christian Bible is the only holy book*. Of course, virtually every non-Christian would disagree. There are many books considered to be holy. The Koran and the Bhagavad-Gita are two examples.
* **7.** *It’s all about money*! The American obsession with money is catching fire throughout the world, but some cultures put less emphasis on it. Years ago, one Russian emigrant to the United States actually returned to Russia. His reason: Americans worship money like a god.
* **8.** *Marrying for reasons other than love is immoral*. Throughout history and even today marriages are arranged for practical reasons: to strengthen family ties, for companionship, and for healthy offspring. Love grows later. In fact, people in some countries find our requirement of romantic love for marriage absurd.

**Religion and Enculturation**

*Most men indeed, as well as most sects in religion, think themselves in possession of all truth, and that wherever others differ from them, it is so far error*.

—BEN FRANKLIN, *AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS* (LAST SPEECH)

Religion is one area in which it is easy to see the enculturation process and its effects on thinking. For example, most Americans are Christians because they were raised by Christian parents and not because of any deliberate choice on their part. Most Christians have not objectively investigated alternative religions or looked extensively into the history of their own religion. Most are unaware, for example, that some romantic stories of other religious founders, like stories of Jesus, involve miraculous and supernatural conceptions, or that the Buddhist and Jain codes of ethics are in some ways more strict than that of the Christian ten commandments. And most Christians are probably unaware of the numerous contradictions in their sacred text, of likely forgeries of some of the Epistles, of the alteration of texts by later scribes, of the geographical errors, and of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a *myth* about a Babylonian king much older than the Old Testament but with stories of a great flood, a man who built a boat to save his family, and a god who made man from clay. Nor are most Christians aware of the extent to which their own Christian doctrine has been shaped by “mere mortals” over the last seventeen hundred years. This lack of familiarity with one’s own religion and that of others, due to enculturation processes, is true not only of Christians, but also of Muslims, and at people of all faiths. Despite our moderate ignorance about our creed and those of others, most of us are certain that the beliefs of our faith are true, and the faith of others and their heroes is false. This we “know” without any investigation at all. Obviously, our thoughts about religion are based more on feelings engendered by our faith and our culture than on critical thinking based upon knowledge and reasoned argument. As William James put it, “Reasoned argument is but a surface exhibition. Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow” (1902, p. 74).

Clearly, if people are seekers of truth and clear thinking, resisting enculturation and its blinding influence (including an examination of their own religion) becomes essential, for it allows people to step back from their conditioning to look at issues more objectively—ethical issues such as abortion, proofs for God’s existence, the meaning of life, new roles for women, and so on. A failure to resist enculturation, especially in religious areas, may lead to fanaticism. One consumed by this disease believes that, as William James puts it, “his deity’s enemies must be put to shame” (1902, p. 342). Out of fanaticism “crusades have been preached and massacres instigated for no other reason than to remove a fancied slight upon the God” (p. 335). Perhaps nobody puts it more bluntly than Robert Green Ingersoll ([**1955**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib91)), the noted nineteenth-century agnostic orator:

* Whenever a man believes that he has the exact truth from God, there is in that man no spirit of compromise. He has not the modesty born of the imperfections of human nature; he has the arrogance of theological certainty and the tyranny born of ignorant assurance. Believing himself to be the slave of god, he imitates his master, and of all tyrants, the worst is a slave in power. (p. 589)

**THINK ABOUT IT:**

*Finding faults with a literal interpretation of a sacred text should not lead a person to rashly dismiss all its teachings that might be throwing out the baby with the bath water. There are timeless words of wisdom scattered throughout most holy books. But if some day you come to believe that, in the words of Nietzsche, “God is dead,” or that your holy book is riddled with contradictions, errors, and myths, would that mean that it would then be okay to steal, lie, cheat, rape, and kill? In other words, what reasons, besides biblical authority, can you find for the moral values and behavioral codes taught in most religions* about stealing, lying, killing, forgiving others,*etc.?*

**SPINOZA: A MAN OF REASON**

*He was offered 1,000 florins a year to conceal his doubts; when he refused, an attempt was made to assassinate him*.

—BERTRAND RUSSELL, *A HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY*

One of the more notable resisters of enculturation was the philosopher Spinoza (1632–1677). He was a simple, poor, and humble man, a lens grinder and mystic of the seventeenth-century. He was raised Jewish, but his zeal for truth led him to study the philosophers of many faiths. Because his ideas challenged Jewish teachings, he was at the age of twenty-four excommunicated from his church and disowned by his father. To the Jews, he was a traitor, but in his own eyes, to desist from his challenges to Jewish dogma would make him a greater traitor, a traitor to the truth (Thomas and Thomas, [**1959**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib196)).

Many set out to convert him, or at least to refute him, but Spinoza stood steadfast, meeting his challengers with reasoned argument. His reliance on reason is apparent in this excerpt from a letter to one of his challengers:

* Acknowledge the reason which God has given you, and follow that, unless you would be numbered with the brutes! (Elwes, p. 425)

Refusing gifts of money from his friends and a university position in philosophy—the latter with a contingency that he not challenge the established religion of the state—Spinoza died a poor man.

**THINKING ACTIVITY 2.1 An Exercise in Enculturation**

Answer “yes” or “no” to the following questions. The purpose of this exercise is to examine the foundations of some of your thinking, not your conclusions, so don’t be concerned about whether your answer is right or wrong. Just be honest. In most instances there is no general agreement on what the right answer should be.

* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **1.** Do you believe that the democratic form of government is the best kind of government in the world?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **a.** Are you aware of the problems of democracy often cited by sociologists and people from nondemocratic countries?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **b.** Can you express the basic philosophy of alternative forms of government?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **c.** Can you cite any positive aspects of either communism or socialism?
* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **2.** Do you believe that abortion is wrong in most or all cases?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **a.** Do you have well-reasoned arguments to support your belief?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **b.** Does your definition of “human being” tell you at what moment a human being comes into existence?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **c.** Do you know at what moment a developing fetus becomes conscious?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **d.** Do you know at what moment a developing fetus is capable of experiencing pain?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **e.** Can you cite any arguments used by prochoice advocates to support abortion?
* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **3.** Do you believe that capital punishment is justified for mass murderers?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **a.** Do you know that capital punishment is a more expensive punishment than life imprisonment because of the numerous and very expensive judicial appeals involved in the former?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **b.** Have you seen any statistics that clearly show capital punishment to inhibit murder?
* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **4.** Do you believe there is a God?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **a.** Are you aware of the problem of evil?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **b.** Can you present an argument against the existence of God?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **c.** Are you aware of some of the logical proofs for God and the challenges to these arguments?
* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **5.** Do you believe that it is moral to use animals for medical experiments that may make life better for human beings?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **a.** Do you believe that it would be moral for beings on another planet with intelligence superior to ours to use human beings as guinea pigs for the advancement of their alien culture?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **b.** Have you ever seen laboratory animals suffer in an experimental setting?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **c.** Do you know that pigs are blowtorched under anesthesia, bunnies have their eyes sewed shut, and monkeys have their heads smashed to study the effects of burn treatment, cosmetics, and concussion respectively?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **d.** Have you ever read any argument against the use of animals in a laboratory?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **e.** Can you cite such an argument now?
* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **6.** Do you believe that ESP is nonsense?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **a.** Have you read any studies by parapsychologists?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **b.** Are you familiar with any case histories of ESP?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **c.** Have you heard of J. B. Rhine?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **d.** Do you have a good argument for your position?
* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **7.** Do you believe that humans are the most intelligent life forms in the universe?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **a.** Do you know that there are billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars, so that if just one in 10 billion stars has a planet with life, there would be over one trillion planets with life?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **b.** Do you know that human life emerged on this planet in about 4.5 billion years and that the universe is old enough for this evolutionary process to have happened three times in succession?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **c.** Are you aware that astronomers have discovered many planets orbiting our nearby stars?
* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **8.** Do you believe that one racial group is innately superior to another?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **a.** Do you know of any evidence that will support your belief?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **b.** Do you know the extent to which the environment determines intelligence and economic success?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **c.** Do you know the amount of genetic similarity among racial groups?
* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **9.** Do you believe that the United States is the best country in the world?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **a.** Do you know that the U.S. infant mortality rate is higher than that of many other modern industrial countries?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **b.** Do you know that the United States has one of the highest rates of violent crime in the world?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **c.** Do you know that the top 1 percent of the U.S. population holds more than 40 percent of all wealth in the country, more than the combined wealth of the bottom 90 percent, reflecting the greatest inequality among advanced industrial countries?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **d.** Do you know that people in many other countries have longer life spans than people in the United States?
* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**10.** Do you believe that humans did not evolve from lower life forms but were created separately?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **a.** Have you ever read a book on the evidence for evolution?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **b.** Have you ever talked to a paleontologist, geologist, biochemist, or zoologist about evolution?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **c.** Do you know that 95 percent of our genes are identical to those of a chimpanzee?
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **d.** Are you aware of any of the following? Homologous structuresVestigial traces Major fossil discoveries DNA similarities How our embryonic ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny

If you answered “yes” to the numbered questions above, but “no” to the lettered questions that follow, it could be that you have merely adopted your position through an enculturation process—that is, you have picked up your ideas through peers, parents, religious community, and so on,instead of through careful reflection and the gathering of facts. A “yes” response to many of the questions above is not necessarily wrong and could be supported by sound reasoning and facts. Though it might appear so, this is not an exercise to support “liberal” views. The point is not to determine what is true about these issues but to show the enculturation process at work by illustrating the lack of both thinking and knowledge that tends to go into these beliefs.

**SELF-CONCEPT**

*It happens over and over again. A company that is doing pretty well in a business it knows will take over another company and ruin it…. Why do companies make such big mistakes? One reason, I suggest, is ego. They want to show they are the biggest, smartest kids on the block…. When will these guys grow up?*

—JACK NEASE, “*AT&T–NCR COMBO JUST DIDN’T COMPUTE*”

Recognizing the extent of our enculturation lessens its effects and moves us closer to an open mind, which is essential to critical and creative thinking. But we must also deal with other barriers that inhibit sound thinking, one of which is self-concept.

Our self-concept is the way we view ourselves. It may be unhealthy if we see ourselves rather negatively (for example, as not very intelligent or very pretty); or it may be healthy, if we see ourselves positively (as attractive and worthwhile). What goes into our self-concept may include not only intelligence and attractiveness but a variety of other things: the sports team we favor, our grades in school, our home, friends, religion, state, country, car, political position, values, possessions, and so on. Thus, someone may view herself as an American, a “card-carrying Republican,” a 49er fan, a conservative Catholic, an animal rights activist, an exceptionally beautiful person, and a consumer who would never buy anything but a Mercedes. People vary in the degree to which they use their attributes, things, values, and affiliations to define themselves and form their self-concept. To some people, these elements are central to the notion of self; they defend them as though they were defending themselves. Thus, we hear stories of sports fans assaulting others because of some critical remark against their favorite football team, teenagers killing each other over a pair of athletic shoes, and wars between countries over sacred buildings and different religious beliefs. When these elements become so central to our notion of who we are, we are not likely to think critically about them. Instead, we respond emotionally and may engage in ego-defense mechanisms, self-serving biases, and other distortions to ensure ourselves that what we identify with—that is, what we think we are—is good.

**THINKING ACTIVITY 2.2 The Idea of Self**

What is our idea of self? Were we born with it? It seems not. Then have we made it our own creation? If so, have we done the right thing in creating it? Does the self truly exist? Or is it only the mind’s idea? Whether our idea of self refers to a real or an illusory self, most of us will agree that we do spend a lot of time defending, maintaining, and creating that idea of self—for example, when we fight with others when they demean us, explain away a bad exam grade in order to appear more intelligent, or buy a new car to show off our wealth. Buddhist scholar and monk Walpola Rahula offers this perspective:

* The idea of self… produces harmful thoughts of “me and mine,” selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities, and problems. It is the source of all troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world. (1974, p. 51)

Do you agree with Rahula’s statement? Is the idea of self this dangerous? Can you cite instances to support it? Can you cite reasons to disagree with this statement?

Pay special attention to the news for the next few days. To what extent can the “troubles in the world” be attributed to the idea of self?

What about troubles in your own personal life? Reflect on your recent arguments or moments of tension with others. To what extent was your thinking affected by your need to protect your self-concept?

Finally, as an exercise in “self,” try to respond to others today and tomorrow without a sense of self, without protecting an ego. How difficult do you think it will be? What were the results?

**THINKING ACTIVITY 2.3 Letting Go**

If your idea of self can get in the way of your thinking, a good strategy to aid straight thinking is to practice letting go of those ideas you have of your self, whether true or false. Letting go means reducing as much as possible your identification with the constituents that you use to define your self. You can begin this letting go by listing the major ideas you have of your self on the lines below.

Activities you most like to do

People and things you most enjoy

Traits you most admire about yourself

Now imagine that you are fifty years older. Which traits will be gone? Which people and things will have been replaced? Which activities will you no longer be doing? Most likely your idea of self today will not be your idea of self tomorrow, yet you will probably believe that you are the same person (philosophers debate whether a person is actually the same or not over time). Should we, therefore, identify with those traits, activities, and loves to the point that it leads us to conceit, anger, defensiveness, and an inability to take constructive criticism when those cherished things are threatened? On the other hand, would it be acceptable to believe in something so much that you would die for it? Do you think it would be possible to let go of your idea of self and still act to defend some principle?

**EGO DEFENSES**

Ego defenses are psychological coping strategies that distort reality in order to protect ourselves from anxiety, guilt, and other bad feelings. Some of the more basic ones that impact on our thinking are denial, projection, and rationalization.

**Denial**

*Experience with an alcoholic population suggests that certain individuals will deny to the point of dying*.

—G. FORREST, *DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF ALCOHOLISM*

When we simply refuse to accept an unpleasant reality, we are using *denial*. Defining what an unpleasant reality is varies from one person to another. For the alcoholic, it is his or her drinking problem. Thus, because of denial, many alcoholics are unable to think critically about their drinking behavior. Similarly, college students may deny that they are doing poorly in school, that they are lazy, or that their boyfriend or girlfriend really does not love them. Religious people may deny scientific or logical challenges to their faith, and scientists may deny sound evidence that challenges their favorite theory. By keeping these unpleasant realities at bay, we protect ourselves from a reality that is unpleasant, but we also inhibit our ability to think objectively about the situation and to make intelligent decisions for our own and others’ best interests. The following appears to be a case of denial:

* No scientist ever has, nor ever will see a star form because the Creator created all of His stars in the fourth day of the creation week (Genesis 1:14–19). In the Spring of 1992, some scientists claimed to be observing a star form out in the stellar heavens. They used various mathematical equations to come to their conclusion. *However, if their conclusion is in direct contradiction to what the Bible says, then their conclusion is wrong* [emphasis added]. (Martin, [**1994**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib122), p. 175)

In the above passage, one gets the sense that no matter what the strength of the evidence for the birth of stars, the conclusion will simply be denied. When our beliefs are already well-grounded, weak, foolish evidence or argument does not deserve attention, as when someone tries to argue for a flat earth. Unfortunately, those using denial too conveniently overestimate the strength of their position, as in the example above, and dismiss strong challenges and facts as nothing more than rubbish. The power of the mind to deny reality might be doubted by some; it should not be. It is all too apparent when one considers the steadfast delusions of the mentally ill: some schizophrenics who believe they are is Jesus will, when in the company of other schizophrenics with the same delusion, insist that the *others* are imposters; anorexics can look in a mirror and see a need to lose weight; and someone with a multiple personality can exhibit a subpersonality of the opposite sex. If the human mind can achieve these lengths of deception, how much easier must it be for it to delude the rest of us with denials of more prosaic things.

**THINK ABOUT IT:**

*What beliefs about yourself, your children, your religion, etc., do you hold so dear that challenges to them might tempt you to deny the unpleasant truth? How about challenges to the truth of your religion? Challenges about the goodness of your child at school? Challenges to your ability to handle drugs? Challenges about the extent to which you have the character traits that make you proud?*

**Projection**

*There I see the beam in my own eye as a mote in my brother’s eye. It is right there because I am unconscious of the beam in my own eye*.

—CARL JUNG, *C. G. JUNG SPEAKING*

Projection is the defense mechanism by which we see in others a part of ourselves that we cannot accept and do not recognize. We may believe others are hostile toward us when it is we who are hostile toward them. We may see in others our own incompetence and deceitfulness, which we are unable to accept in ourselves. We may see selfish motives in others, which are really the selfish motives in us that we do not consciously recognize. In short, we see others not as *they* are, but as*we* are. Our thinking about ourselves and others is therefore grossly distorted when we engage in projection. Like denial, this interferes with our ability to think critically about ourselves, others, and our social situations. Notice in the example below how a man’s perception of others as crazy and desiring to hurt him seems to be a projection of his own inner reality.

* **INTERVIEWER:** Well, how do you feel about all those things they are saying?
* **PATIENT:** What do you mean, “feel”? [said with distrust]. *They’re crazy*. *They want to see me destroyed*.
* **INTERVIEWER:** Oh, well, that’s awful. It’s scary to have people say crazy things about you. What would make them do that?
* **PATIENT:** They’re jealous of me, that I have my wife; they must be trying to get her from me.
* **INTERVIEWER:** Well, of course, you’re a proud man, and it must be difficult to have them talking about you like that. Now let’s see if there’s any way we can help you stay on top of things and keep in control. We can both agree that you’re a strong man, and it’s important not to let it weaken you.
* **PATIENT:** Yes. I’m strong. *But I’m very worried that her family might make me do something crazy—like want to hurt someone*. (Vaillant and Perry, [**1985**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib202), p. 965; emphasis added)

**Rationalization**

*The easiest person to deceive is one’s self*.

—LORD LYTTON

Of all the defense mechanisms, rationalization is perhaps the greatest inhibitor of clear thinking. Rationalization is distorted thinking that attempts to justify behavior motivated by self-interest or unacceptable desires. It serves to protect us from bad feelings by, for example, turning selfish motives into honorable ones. For example, a rationalization may have come from the captain of the cruise ship *Oceanos*, which sank in the Indian Ocean in 1991. When asked why he left his ship in a lifeboat while hundreds of passengers were still on board, he replied that the order to abandon ship applies to everyone, and once the order is given it does not matter when the captain leaves. He also mentioned that he could control rescue operations better from the shore.

In essence, rationalization is lying to ourselves about the real reasons for our behaviors and feelings. It is essential that we believe in this lie in order for it to protect us; if we knew we were lying, it would do us no good. Many of us can recognize the following tax-season rationalization:

* I cheat on my taxes because of the way the government spends our money, you know—hundreds of dollars for a plain hammer and thousands of dollars for a toilet seat. It’s our duty as U.S. citizens to put a stop to this nonsense. Maybe if we all held back a little Uncle Sam would get the message.

Rationalization has its roots in psychoanalytic psychology. Ironically, even its founder, Sigmund Freud, may have been guilty of it. He gave several reasons why the proverbial couch, which deters patient-therapist eye contact, enhances therapy, but elsewhere he stated, “I cannot put up with being stared at by other people for eight hours a day (or more)” (cited in Roazen, [**1975**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib156), p. 123).

A famous, lengthy rationalization is found in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*. The Civil War soldier, who abandons his comrades and flees for his life out of sheer terror when an enemy battalion approaches, justifies his actions later:

* He [speaking of himself] had done a good part in saving himself, who was a little piece of the army. He had considered the time, he said, to be one in which it was the duty of every little piece to rescue itself if possible. Later the officers could fit the little pieces together again, and make a battle front. If none of the little pieces were wise enough to save themselves from the flurry of death at such a time, why, then, where would be the army? It was all plain that he proceeded according to very correct and commendable rules… He, the enlightened man… had fled because of his superior perceptions and knowledge. (Crane, 1894/[**1951**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib38), pp. 87–88)

Yes, indeed! As Shakespeare’s Falstaff said, “The better part of valor is discretion” (Henry the Fourth, Part I).

Finally, let’s not forget the rationalizations of the anti-abolitionists, those people who wholeheartedly supported slavery, including the Fugitive Slave Bill. How many of them, instead of facing the truth of their motivations, that their support resided in enculturated bigotry or the personal economic advantages of free slave labor, convinced themselves that their position was an honorable one, that slavery was in accord with the Law of God, that sending runaway slaves back to their masters was also in accord with the law of God, and that the support of slavery was good for the country’s stability? Preachers read passages from the Bible that apparently support slavery (e.g., Exodus 21:2–8 and 20–21; Leviticus 25:44–46; Ephesians 6:5; Timothy 6:1–2) and delivered their rationalizations in public sermons: “When the slave asks me to stand between him and his master, what does he ask? He asks me to murder a nation’s life; and I will not do it, because I have a conscience—because there is a God” (Craft, [**2000**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib36), p. 733).

**SELF-SERVING BIASES**

*Nothing is easier than self-deceit. For what each man wishes, that he also believes to be true*.

—DEMOSTHENES, *THIRD OLYNTHIAC*

If our actions are driven by good motives, they do not need to be rationalized. But actions, even with good motives, can lead us into other thinking distortions if they lead to undesirable consequences, consequences that threaten our self-esteem. The actions of others can also threaten our self-esteem. Such ego-threatening situations can lead us to cognitive biases called *self-serving biases*. These are biases in our thinking and perception that protect or elevate our self-esteem. As noted above, we do not always think about and perceive things as they are, for that would often mean looking at ourselves in an unpleasant light. Consequently, most people tend to see what they*need* to see and what they *want* to see in order to maintain or strengthen positive feelings about themselves (Maslow, [**1954**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib123)).

One aspect of the self-serving bias is the tendency to take credit for our successes and to blame our failures on external factors (Zuckerman, [**1979**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib227); Bradley, [**1978**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib23)). For example, a student failing an exam might attribute her failure to an unfair test or an incompetent instructor rather than her poor study habits. And politicians who lose elections are likely to attribute their loss to negative campaigning by their opponent or a lack of funds necessary to get their message across rather than to flaws in their own personality or political perspective. On the other hand, when we get promoted at work or get an A on a test, we are likely to attribute our success to our intelligence, perseverance, and hard work.

Whereas we often attribute our failures to situational factors and our successes to personal ones, a second aspect of the self-serving bias is the tendency to make opposite attributions when judging the behavior of others that threatens our own self-esteem. When a student competitor in college gets a better grade than we do, we may find it threatening to our self-esteem and attribute the better grade to luck or some privileged relationship with the instructor. Yet, when others fail, we may look to their character for an explanation and ascribe their failure to their incompetence, ignorance, or laziness.

The tendency to engage in ego defenses and self-serving biases should decrease as our psychological health increases. Healthy people are more able to own up to the totality of who they are, both positive and negative (Jung, [**1969a**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib102)). When we can truly accept ourselves as we are with our faults—that is, when we can think of ourselves as worthwhile persons in spite of our failings—then we have less need to repress, deny, project, or make misattributions to protect ourselves. As healthier people, we are less threatened by the successes of others and more able to tolerate our own failures; we own up to our mistakes and give credit to others. In sum, we think better for being better.

**THINK ABOUT IT:**

*Have you ever made an erroneous attribution for someone else’s behavior? Have you ever been the victim of such an attribution?*

**OTHER ATTRIBUTION ERRORS**

Our attributions about our own behaviors as well as the behavior of others are often wrong because they are biased by our need to protect our self-esteem. But they can also go wrong for other reasons. For example, if we saw a young man speeding by in a red convertible with a beautiful lady by his side, we would probably attribute his behavior to immaturity and showing off. This is because of a tendency we have to attribute the behavior of others to their personal traits instead of to their situation. Oftentimes these internal attributions are wrong and the situation is the real force behind the behavior. In such instances we have committed the*fundamental attribution error*. In the example above, the student might be speeding to the hospital because his gorgeous wife is about to deliver a baby.

The *actor-observer bias* extends the fundamental attribution error one more step by stating that we tend to make internal attributions when observing the behavior of others but situational attributions when assessing our own behavior (except when examining our success). Thus, employees (observers) may attribute a manager’s strict rules to the manager’s rigid personality, whereas the manager (actor) explains the rules as necessary to deal with the stresses and pressures coming from her superiors. On the other hand, a manager (the observer now) may see her unproductive employees as lazy and unmotivated, whereas they (the actors) perceive their unproductive behavior as a natural consequence of working for an insensitive, authoritarian personality. The differences in attribution are probably rooted in differences in points of view: the boss is less aware of herself and more aware of the employees, while the employees are focused on the boss and are less focused on themselves. Fortunately, this bias can be minimized by having each side empathize with the other (Regan and Totten, [**1975**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib152)).

**SELF-SERVING BIASES?**

Self-serving biases are cognitive distortions that put us in a favorable position. The statements below come from the insurance forms of car-accident victims who were asked to summarize the accident. Are these self-serving biases or just grammatical mistakes?

* **1.** A pedestrian hit me and went under my car.
* **2.** As I approached the intersection a sign suddenly appeared in a place where no sign had ever appeared before.
* **3.** My car was legally parked as it backed into the other vehicle.
* **4.** The indirect cause of this accident was a little guy in a small car with a big mouth.
* **5.** An invisible car came out of nowhere, struck my vehicle, and vanished.
* **6.** The telephone pole was approaching. I was attempting to swerve out of the way, when it struck my front end.
* **7.** I had been driving for forty years when I fell asleep at the wheel.
* **8.** To avoid hitting the car in front of me, I struck the pedestrian.
* **9.** The pedestrian had no idea which direction to run, so I ran over him.
* **10.** I pulled away from the side of the road, glanced at my mother-in-law, and headed for the embankment.

**THINKING ACTIVITY 2.4 Owning Up to Our Dark Side**

We have seen how a failure to see and accept ourselves as we are can lead to thinking distortions as we rationalize, project, deny, and use self-serving biases. Therefore, it is worthwhile to look at the dark side of ourselves and accept it as part of who we are. And if we think we don’t have a dark side, we might consider the words of the philosopher Bertrand Russell ([**1921**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib165)):

* Self knowledge is proverbially rare and difficult. Most men, for example, have in their nature meannesses, vanities, and envies of which they are quite unconscious, though even their best friends can perceive them without any difficulty.

So be honest with yourself and write down those “meannesses, vanities, and envies.” To help you identify those dark elements, which the psychologist Carl Jung called the “shadow,” reflect back on criticisms you have received from others and remember that other people, especially our friends and loved ones, often know us better than we know ourselves. And don’t forget your enemies: “It is an old saying but true: If you wish to learn your faults, listen to what your enemies say” (Eads,[**1879**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib56), p. 167). Also reflect on how you reacted to that criticism and consider these statements by M.-L. von Franz ([**1964**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib207)), one of Jung’s students:

* If you feel an overwhelming rage coming up in you when a friend reproaches you about a fault, you can be fairly sure that at this point you will find a part of your shadow, of which you are unconscious. It is particularly in contacts with people of the same sex that one stumbles over both one’s own shadow and those of other people. When an individual makes an attempt to see his shadow, he becomes aware of (and often ashamed of) those qualities and impulses he denies in himself but can plainly see in other people—such things as egotism, mental laziness, and sloppiness; unreal fantasies, schemes, and plots; carelessness and cowardice; inordinate love of money and possessions—in short, all the little sins about which he might previously have told himself: “That doesn’t matter; nobody will notice it, and in any case other people do it too.” (pp. 168–69)

So that you don’t walk away from this exercise depressed and full of loathing about yourself, write down ten positive characteristics of your personality also. Then congratulate yourself for taking a small step toward better thinking and a richer life, for “only those who have achieved self-knowledge and are constantly seeking both to enlarge it and apply it in their daily living, are capable of overcoming their automatic reactions and reaching their own ideal limits” (Mumford,[**1951**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib131), p. 250).

**THE ROLE OF EXPECTATIONS AND SCHEMATA**

*Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868–1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. “It is overfull. No more will go in!” “Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”*

—N. SENZAKI AND P. REPS, “*ZEN STORIES*”

Not only do we tend to think about the world according to what we want to see and what we need to see, we tend to think of it in terms of what we expect to see. We tend to perceive and think about others and situations in terms of the ideas we have already formed about them. These ideas are called *schemata* (plural of *schema*). Often we distort the truth to make it fit into our existing schema, or we notice only those aspects of others’ behavior or ideas that fit into our existing ideas about them. In other words, we are reluctant to change our perceptions and ideas to accommodate the facts (accommodation); instead, it is easier to fit our observations and thinking into our existing schemata (assimilation). If our prior experience with someone is that he is extremely selfish and we form an idea of him as “a selfish person,” then we tend to see his current actions as selfish. If he suggests a new policy at work to increase morale and productivity, we wonder about the selfish motives that must be underlying his new policy. Surely he cannot be interested in the well-being of others and the company’s productivity.

Similarly, if a teacher believes that a student is not very bright, frequent questions from that student may be interpreted by the teacher as verification of the student’s ignorance. On the other hand, if the teacher is told that a student is intelligent and highly motivated, the student’s questions may be seen as reflecting that person’s insight and motivation. Imagine what your reaction would be if you heard that a dictator was freeing some political prisoners and giving millions of dollars to the poor in his country. You would probably either discount the information as mere propaganda or question his motives, believing that he was trying to manipulate his people for some reason. His behavior would not likely cause you to change your perception of him from a ruthless dictator to a compassionate benefactor.

A good example of a schema that influences the way we perceive and think is the *stereotype*—a simplistic, biased view about members of a certain group. We learn stereotypes from a variety of sources. Sometimes we overgeneralize from our limited experience with members of a group. Often we learn our parents’ stereotypes by listening and observing them, and we sometimes absorb stereotypes from our peers and the media. Whatever their source, stereotypes have a powerful effect on our thinking.

It is important to realize that stereotypes are inaccurate. They assume that groups are more homogeneous than they are. For some reason, when it comes to our own group, we see the richness and diversity of its members, but when it comes to our perception of other groups, we assume that their members are all alike. On what basis can we possibly assume so? Certainly, similarities exist among group members but not to the degree that stereotypes imply.

Although stereotypes in particular and schemata in general often distort our thinking, sometimes we do change our views of people and situations when we encounter facts contradicting a particular schema. Some research suggests that this accommodation is most likely to occur when the new information is moderately discrepant with our schema (Bochner and Insko, [**1966**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib17)). If an idea is very similar to our existing views, we are likely to minimize the difference and assimilate it into our existing schema, thus not modifying our views. Likewise, if the information is highly discrepant, it simply cannot fit into our schema and we reject it. For example, if typical Christians were exposed to arguments that Jesus never existed and that the entire New Testament is a myth, they would find this information very discrepant and would probably reject it without the least consideration. On the other hand, information that Jesus was unusually friendly with a political group whose intent was to overthrow the Romans might simply be assimilated into their schema of Jesus as a spiritual leader, who just happened to appeal to some political groups bent on overthrowing Roman rulers. Little or no change would be made in their concept of Jesus.

Moderately discrepant information, however, is too different to be easily assimilated and yet not so different that it must be rejected. Thus, if we are likely to change our views in the face of evidence, moderately discrepant information will most likely, but not necessarily, lead to that change. Can you imagine any real or fictitious revelation about Jesus that could be considered by most Christians as moderately discrepant with their views?

**THINK ABOUT IT:**

*An open mind is essential to critical thinking. But there is no easy recipe for acquiring an open mind, especially regarding prejudice. Negative thoughts toward a minority group may go, but negative feelings often linger on. Those feelings may lead us to continue our negative behaviors and attitudes toward a group*.

**EMOTIONAL INFLUENCES**

Emotions are an important feature of human experience. They are, in part, what separates humans from machines and the lower animals, for machines can compute but they cannot experience joy. And although animals may find themselves attached to others, they do not love them. Emotions give our world color and richness, joy and surprise, but also pain and sorrow. Emotions can affect and inspire thought, said William James, but he also said they can destroy it. Later in this book we look at how emotions can inspire thinking, but for now our attention focuses on their inhibiting influence, on their capacity to bury, twist, and fragment the thinking process and take it to the depths of the irrational.

**Anger**

*Why does my violence so silence reason and intelligence?*

—JEAN RACINE, *PHAEDRA*

Both Plato and Aristotle believed that anger could be a “potentially constructive ally of reason” (Averill, [**1982**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib5), p. 85), but both of them also recognized its destructive influences on rational thought. This destructive influence was apparent to the Eastern philosophers of that period also. In the Bhagavad Gita (ch II. vs. 63) we read:

* From anger arises bewilderment, from bewilderment loss of memory; and from loss of memory, the destruction of intelligence and from the destruction of intelligence he perishes. (Radhakrishnan, [**1948**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib148), p. 126)

Likewise, the Roman philosopher Seneca saw no value in anger:

* No provocation justifies it, no situation permits it, and no benefit is gained by it. Once allowed, anger entirely consumes its possessor and renders dull his capacity for reasoning and sensible action. (Averill, [**1982**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib5), p. 83)

Certainly anger and reason appear to most people to be the antithesis of each other; where one appears, the other seems to be absent. Anger has destroyed intimacy, thwarted good judgment, motivated senseless killings, inspired numerous wars, and probably burned more bridges in the career paths of men and women than any other single force. That’s because it distorts our perception of a situation, colors our ability to think critically about it, and impairs our self-control. As William James put it, “Nothing annihilates an inhibition as irresistibly as anger does it.” (1902, p. 264)

The cause of anger may be a threat to something we hold dear. It may also be due to frustration, which is often caused by the blocking of a goal, or even by stress and hormonal changes in our bodies. No matter what the source, it is important not to make important decisions in the heat of anger, for good thinking does not prevail during such moments. Instead, we want to release the tension caused by the anger and strike out, hurt, or destroy.

The short-term goal of releasing tension can supersede and crush years of careful deliberation and planning as we say or do things we know we should not. The aspiring businesswoman ruins her career by berating her boss for making a poor decision, or a man angry at his fiancée’s selfish behavior castigates her for all her personal faults and breaks off the engagement. Although anger may inspire great speeches, it often throws thinking in the backseat as our emotions take control.

Earlier we mentioned how previous knowledge, like stereotypes and other schemata, can distort our thinking. Feelings can also affect thinking in a similar way. For example, anger can not only overrule our thinking but also distort it so that we believe that what we are doing is justified and rational. For example, a parent may severely spank a child because of frustration with the child and a need to release anger. The parent may then rationalize the aggression against the child by claiming that such punishment was necessary to teach the child appropriate behavior—in spite of the fact that psychologists have for years been saying that appropriate behavior can be taught by nonviolent methods and that such spanking can be harmful to the child. The parent does not acknowledge the real motivation for the behavior.

***Dealing with Anger***

If anger can lead to unthinking behavior or override our better judgment, we need to lessen its impact. We offer five suggestions.

First, *do not vent your anger:*

* The psychological rationales for ventilating anger do not stand up under experimental scrutiny. The weight of the evidence indicates precisely the opposite: expressing anger makes you angrier, solidifies an angry attitude, and establishes a hostile habit. If you keep quiet about momentary irritations and distract yourself with pleasant activity until your fury simmers down, chances are you will feel better, and feel better faster, than if you let yourself go in a shouting match. (Tavris, [**1982**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib194), pp. 143–44)

Besides fueling the original anger, venting anger more often results in guilt, lowered self-esteem, mild depression, anxiety, embarrassment, and an exacerbation of the original conflict (Tavris, [**1982**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib194); Averill, [**1982**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib5)). This is not to say that you should stew for days with unabated anger. If the anger does not eventually subside, although usually it does, an attempt should be made to calmly talk about the matter. Pick a time when the other person is not angry and will therefore be more likely to listen.

Second, *get advice* about your chosen course of action from others who are not angry. They may be able to give you a clearer perspective and prevent the sometimes disastrous consequences of decisions made under the influence of anger.

Third, *become assertive*. Anger is sometimes caused by continuous victimization. Being assertive means standing up for your rights in a self-controlled, nonaggressive manner that diminishes the potential for defensiveness in the other person. Bear in mind, however, that it is irrational to believe that life should always treat us justly. In other words, don’t overdo your assertive behavior.

Fourth, *learn to relax* and to practice other stress-management strategies. Reducing the stress in your life and practicing relaxation exercises regularly can help you control the frequency of your anger.

Lastly, *don’t get angry*. This may sound simplistic; however, when you consider that anger is rooted in the meaning you give to the events around you, as opposed to the events themselves, it is reasonable to try to alter that initial perception and prevent the anger from occurring altogether. Psychologists call this *cognitive restructuring* or *reappraisal*. For example, if you perceive that someone is trying to slight you in some way, you might ask yourself if there is another reason for his behavior. It might be possible, for example, that he is unaware of the impact his behavior has on you. Empathy, identifying with the position of the other person, sometimes helps to make these reappraisals. Or you might want to put things in proper perspective. For example, if you were counting on someone to mow the lawn today and he did not, you can ask yourself how important it is that the lawn be mowed today as opposed to tomorrow. Even if the lawn mowing were to be skipped for a week, what’s the worst that would happen?

**THINK ABOUT IT:**

*Aristotle said, “But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way—this is not easy”* (Nichomachean Ethics). *This statement suggests that there is a place for anger. Even Jesus got angry: “And making a kind of whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, also the sheep and oxen, and he poured out the money of the changers and overturned the tables” (John 2:15). In what situations, if any, do you think anger is an appropriate response? What would be the right way to express it? Be careful that you do not rationalize your past behavior*.

**Passion**

*Be it what it will, the ruling passion conquers reason still*.

—ALEXANDER POPE, *MORAL ESSAYS*

William Penn defined passion as “a sort of fever in the mind, which ever leaves us weaker than it found us” (1906, p. 57). We define it more prosaically as the intense love of some person, thing, situation, or value to a level that inhibits objective reasoning about its object. Most people have experienced it in romantic love, whence the statement “Love is blind.” In love or wherever it is found, passion is able to unseat reason, and rational thought becomes “rationalized thought.”

How many unwanted pregnancies occur because a couple has surrendered to “the heat of passion”? How many lives have been lost because of a passion for the euphoria of drugs? And how many good relationships have been destroyed by misplaced passion felt for someone else? When we love a person or thing intensely, we typically do not see the dark side; we tend only to justify our desires. Romantic lovers, for example, idealize their partners and often find them without faults. Contrary opinions from friends and family are seen as motivated by jealousy or born of misunderstanding.

Our passion may be our religion, our food, or our drugs. It may be television, a person, a home, or a material object. Whatever the source, we tend to immerse ourselves in our object of passion, revel in its various qualities, and only later, if ever, find our reason again. Perhaps we can take the advice of the Cistercian monks (Trappists) who suggest developing a humble awareness of passion’s hold on our reason: “Cistercian humility makes you very circumspect in your actions when you know your will to be weak and wounded and your intellect to be often blinded by selfishness and passion.” (Merton, [**1949**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib126), p. 23)

**THINK ABOUT IT:**

*For what people, things, or ideas do you have such passion that you may not be able to think clearly about them?*

**Depression**

When our object of passion is lost, we may find ourselves dysphoric or seriously depressed. This response is echoed in the story of Romeo and Juliet and the numerous young and old alike every year who commit suicide out of a deep sense of loss. But the loss of something dear to us is only one cause of depression. Other causes include biochemical factors, severe stress, a sense of hopelessness, lack of sunlight, and illogical thinking.

Of particular interest to us are the effects that depression may have on thinking. Several studies on depression support the idea that irrational cognitions are correlated with depression. (For our purposes “irrational” and “illogical” are the same, although some make a distinction here.) However, some disagreement exists about whether unhealthy cognitions cause depression, or whether depression causes unhealthy cognitive styles. Although we can find research supporting both hypotheses, the conclusion from a longitudinal study on this topic, using a sample of 998 people, is that “people change their expectancies and subscribe to irrational beliefs as a result of being depressed,” and not the other way around (Lewinsohn et al., [**1981**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib116)). Other studies (e.g., Miranda and Persons, [**1988**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib128)) also give support to the idea that mood can influence thinking.

The kinds of irrational thinking that often accompany depression include a tendency to see or exaggerate the negative side of a situation and to diminish the positive:

* A depressed patient observed that a faucet was leaking in a bathroom, that the pilot light was out in the stove, and that one of the steps in the staircase was broken. He concluded, “The whole house is deteriorating.” The house was in excellent condition (except for these minor problems); he had made a massive overgeneralization. (Beck, [**1976**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib13), p. 219)

To depressed people the cup is half empty, not half full. Depressed people also tend to minimize their successes and maximize their failures by attributing their successes to external causes and their failures to internal causes. In general, depressives are more critical of themselves than they should be and see the world and their future in a more negative light than nondepressives do. That is why suicide prevention centers must often help suicidal people think of alternatives to their problems. Their ability to see their situations clearly is often impaired by their negative mood. As Schneidman ([**1985**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib173)) points out, suicidal people, most of whom are depressed, may see only two alternatives to their dilemma: suicide or some unrealistic solution.

Depression in various degrees is so prevalent that it is often called the common cold of mental illness. Ten percent of college students, for example, exhibit moderate depression (Craighead et. al,[**1984**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib37)). Mild depression may be much more common, and even mild depression can negatively color our thinking.

***Dealing with Depression***

Serious depression requires serious psychological or medical intervention by a professional. But if we are simply suffering from “the blues,” we must realize that our thinking about ourselves and about life in general is probably colored somewhat by our negative mood. If possible, we should put off major decisions until our mood lifts or talk to others to help us explore alternative courses of action and achieve better insight into our situation. If we have not already done so, we should exercise; exercise can lessen depression (Stein and Motta, [**1992**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib188); Dunn et al., [**2005**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib53)). In the meantime, we can try to identify the causes of our depression and take action to correct them or, if necessary, seek advice on handling those causes.

Sometimes the cause of our depression is our own irrational thinking. For example, if we encounter a person who does not like us, we may become extremely upset about it and spend many hours wondering what it is about us that is difficult to like, and we may even suffer insomnia worrying about it. We may also strive excessively to please that person. Through our own reflection or through the help of others we may come to see the irrational assumption underlying our unhealthy reaction: “Everyone should like me because I’m a nice person.” If we think carefully about this assumption for a moment we can see there is no truth to this, for plenty of nice people, including Jesus, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa, had enemies. No matter how nice we may be, some people will invariably misunderstand us or project on us their own inadequacies. Similarly, students who feel lowered self-worth when they receive a disappointing grade are operating under a different irrational belief: “My worth depends upon my achievements.” They need only remind themselves that many psychopaths have done well on college exams to realize the error in this kind of thinking.

Cognitive psychologists help people with dysfunctional thinking to see the irrational nature of their thoughts and then suggest rational replacements. Our friends and colleagues may help us do the same, and we can even learn to do this ourselves. In the example below we can see how one cognitive psychologist challenged the distorted thinking of a student who was fearful of giving a speech (sound familiar?).

* **PATIENT:** I have to give a talk before my class tomorrow and I’m scared stiff.
* **THERAPIST:** What are you afraid of?
* **PATIENT:** I think I’ll make a fool of myself.
* **THERAPIST:** Suppose you do make a fool of yourself. Why is that so bad?
* **PATIENT:** I’ll never live it down.
* **THERAPIST:** “Never” is a long time…. Now look here, suppose they ridicule you. Can you die from it?
* **PATIENT:** Of course not.
* **THERAPIST:** Suppose they decide you’re the worst public speaker that ever lived…. Will this ruin your future career?
* **PATIENT:** No…. But it would be nice if I could be a good speaker.
* **THERAPIST:** Sure it would be nice. But if you flubbed it, would your parents or your wife disown you?
* **PATIENT:** No…. They’re very sympathetic.
* **THERAPIST:** Well, what would be so awful about it?
* **PATIENT:** I would feel pretty bad.
* **THERAPIST:** For how long?
* **PATIENT:** For about a day or two.
* **THERAPIST:** And then what?
* **PATIENT:** Then I’d be O.K. (Beck, [**1976**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib13), p. 250)

The resolution of depression is not always easy. Fortunately, most people do not become severely depressed. And most who are mildly to moderately depressed, unless it is a major personality characteristic, will find their depression eventually lifting. In the meantime, we must be careful about the thoughts and decisions we make while depressed and remind ourselves of the cognitive distortions we may be experiencing.

**THINKING ACTIVITY 2.5 Five Thinking Errors**

The five thinking errors below range in severity and frequency and can be found in all of us from time to time. They are particularly likely to appear in times of emotional strain. As you read them, think about instances in which these thinking errors have distorted your thinking, and how these errors have affected your significant others.

* **1.** *Personalization:* egocentric thinking in which the world is seen to revolve unduly around the individual. A person might take responsibility for a disappointing picnic at the lake by saying, “I should have known it would probably rain today; it rains a lot in May. I should have waited until June.” Or upon walking by a woman in a store with an angry look on her face, a person wonders, “Why is she mad at me? What did I do?”
* **2.** *Polarized thinking:* also called “black and white thinking” or “dichotomous thinking,” categorizing complexities into one extreme or the other (later we examine it as the “either/or fallacy”). For example, a depressed person may see himself only in a negative light and fail to see the good characteristics he has. Or if a person is not extremely successful, she might consider herself a loser. A man might say, “People either like me, or they hate me,” not realizing that people can also have mixed feelings about him. A person with a borderline personality disorder often sees people as either all good or all bad. Politics is often riddled with this kind of thinking when we assess the merits of a bill, candidate, or foreign policy.
* **3.** *Overgeneralization:* drawing broad conclusions on the basis of a single incident. A student fails one course at college and then believes she is a failure and will not be able to earn her degree. Or after receiving a reprimand duly or unduly deserved, a person thinks, “Everyone hates me.” Or after his girlfriend breaks up with him, a man thinks, “I’m never going to find someone who will love me.”
* **4.** *Catastrophizing:* a common characteristic of anxious people in which they consider the worst possible outcome of an event. A young man announces to his mother that he is getting married, and she immediately thinks about the likelihood of a deformed baby or even a divorce in his future. A young woman going out on a blind date expects it to be a real disappointment. Or a father, upon hearing that his son intends to major in philosophy, imagines his son permanently unemployed and expects him to be a constant financial burden.
* **5.** *Selective abstraction:* focusing on one detail of a situation and ignoring the larger picture. For example, an instructor receives a very favorable evaluation from 90 percent of her students but dwells instead on the unfavorable comments from the few. Or a football player, after an overall excellent performance, curses himself for the one pass that he should have caught (Beck, [**1976**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib13)).

**STRIVING FOR COGNITIVE CONSISTENCY**

Cognitive consistency refers to a harmony among our various thoughts, and to a harmony between our thoughts and behaviors. Human beings strive for cognitive consistency because holding onto thoughts that are inconsistent can create an unpleasant state called *cognitive dissonance* (discord) when the inconsistency cannot be justified. This state of dissonance may lead to psychological tension and uncomfortable feelings. When we find ourselves in a state of cognitive dissonance, we will often try to change our thoughts or our behaviors to achieve harmony and thereby reduce the tension.

Festinger and Carlsmith ([**1959**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib66)) conducted a now classic study illustrating the effects of cognitive dissonance. They had subjects perform a boring task and then asked them to lie to the next subjects by telling them that the task was actually quite enjoyable. Some of the subjects were paid $1 to lie, whereas others were paid $20. Later the subjects were asked about their feelings toward the task. Results showed that subjects who lied for $1 rated the task more favorable than the ones who lied for $20 (about $130 in today’s money). This was exactly what Festinger and Carlsmith’s cognitive dissonance theory would have predicted. The group that lied for $20 could more easily justify the inconsistency between their thoughts and their behavior. They might have said to themselves something like this:

* The task was really boring, but I told this other guy that it was a lot of fun. I know I lied, but, hey, wouldn’t you for twenty bucks? I mean, it’s not like I hurt anyone, you know.

On the other hand, the group that lied for $1 would experience dissonance and pressure to change their belief, because it is not easy to justify the inconsistency for only $1:

* The task was really boring, but I told this other guy that it was a lot of fun. I lied for a lousy buck. Boy do I sell out cheap—a lousy buck. But, hey, when I thought about it, you know, it really wasn’t so bad. In fact it was sort of challenging. I mean, turning pegs in a hole a quarter of a turn over and over again for a half-hour. Hey, that’s a challenge! Kind of fun. No, I didn’t lie to the guy, it was quite challenging and enjoyable actually. Besides, I wouldn’t lie for a buck.

Thus we see how our thinking can be influenced by dissonance and the need to reduce tension. Specifically, cognitive dissonance can lead to rationalization, a defense mechanism mentioned above.

The need for cognitive consistency shows up in many areas of life. When buying a car, for example, we might be torn between two attractive models: an expensive model with a lot of extras, or a less exciting but more affordable model. If we don’t believe in spending a lot of money for a car or paying for a lot of unnecessary frills but we are somehow talked into doing so, we experience dissonance as our behavior becomes incompatible with our beliefs. We then have two options to remove the dissonance: (1) we can change our behavior—in this case, that would mean taking the car back, which is not usually an option—or (2) we can change our thinking about the car, in other words, rationalize our purchase:

* Compared to the cheaper car I was looking at, this one will last longer, so I’ll easily get the extra money out of it. Besides, this car is safer than the other one. And when it comes to your very life, you can never spend too much. As far as the accessories go, well, they’ll help to sell the car when that distant day arrives. Besides, what’s wrong with a little pleasure in life. You only live once, you know.

Incongruence among thoughts or between thoughts and behaviors does not always cause a dissonant state. For example, if a student disliked the school she was attending but no other school in her area was affordable, there would be no cognitive dissonance. As long as there is sufficient justification for the discrepant situation, cognitive dissonance does not occur. Or if a young man does not believe in premarital sex, but when the moment arrives at which his beliefs must be put to the test he engages in such sex, then cognitive dissonance would probably occur—unless he can sufficiently justify the discrepancy somehow, such as believing he was not free to choose. He might argue to himself that he was drinking that night and didn’t know what he was doing. If this argument is convincing, no dissonance will occur and he will not be motivated to change his thinking about premarital sex. If, however, he cannot find a source of coercion or justifiable motivation for his behavior, he will probably experience dissonance and be motivated to either (1) change his thinking about the wrongfulness of premarital sex or (2) change his behavior. Because he cannot undo the sexual behavior that caused the dissonance, his only option is to change his attitude, or live with the dissonance.

We can apply the idea of cognitive consistency to relationships in other ways. Balance theory argues that our likes and dislikes of other people should be in harmony. For example, if you are friends with Mary and you both are pro-life, then you have a balanced relationship in that area; there is no disharmony. However, if you are friends with Mary and you learn that she is pro-life but you are pro-choice, you have some incongruence, an imbalance that creates pressure on you to change either your attitude toward abortion or your thinking and feelings toward Mary.

Balance theory predicts that many people would vote for a candidate because their friend or spouse did. Doing so would create a more balanced situation. When the imbalance grows too strong, some couples won’t even talk about politics or religion, although many couples and friends do openly disagree with each other and maintain their deep friendship at the same time. Crucial or cherished ideas create more balance pressure than rather irrelevant ones. Who cares, for example, what your friend’s favorite ice cream is? Relationships do not change over a disagreement about vanilla or chocolate. However, dissonance would likely occur in a relationship when both persons are quite politically active and share very different political ideas.

Many couples and their mutual friends experience an unbalanced relationship when the couple gets divorced. For example, it is often difficult for an ex-wife to continue her friendship with someone who still likes her ex-husband. Similarly, it is difficult for the mutual friend to continue her affection for both of her divorced friends when each criticizes the other in her presence. In order to eliminate her dissonance, she may begin thinking and feeling negatively about one or the other and break off her relationship with that person, or she may find a way to get them together again. Her third option is to distance herself from both of them.

Thus we can see how dissonance and imbalanced situations can change our sexual mores, political views, and attitudes toward our friends, for no other reason than to remove the incongruence and tension we experience. Our need for compatible thoughts and behaviors actually leads to altered thinking.

**STRESS**

*It’s when I’m weary of considerations,*

*And life is too much like a pathless wood…*

*I’d like to get away from earth awhile*

—ROBERT FROST, “*BIRCHES*”

Stress is excessive demand upon the body or mind, producing physical or psychological strain. The sources of stress are numerous: work overload, rapid cultural change, time pressure, conflict, noise pollution, negative life experiences, unrealistic expectations, daily hassles, and so on. These stressors not only contribute to between 60 and 80 percent of all diseases, but they affect our cognition as well. Stress can impair our memory, the basis of much of our thinking, and it can also affect thinking more directly. Stress can lead to preoccupation with an idea, concentration difficulties, deterioration in judgment and logical thinking, and negative self-evaluations. It may also lead to an inability to check our thoughts against reality (Beck et al., [**1979**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib12)) and may seriously interfere with our ability to make decisions (Janis, [**1982**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib95)). Under stress, our ability to perceive alternative solutions to a problem diminishes, our capacity to search for relevant information to aid our decision making is impaired, and the long-term consequences of our decisions are overlooked. This leads us to make decisions prematurely—an action called “premature closure” (Janis, [**1982**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib95))—and then creates more stress as we deal with the consequences of our poor decisions:

* A professor was asked to speak to a community group. He walked to the wrong room and suddenly realized that the presentation was to be given in another building. Beginning to feel pressure, he trotted out to the parking lot to drive to the other building, which was about a block away. He reached for his car keys and found none. Panic began to build. He could see the building in which he was to speak but could not get into his car to drive over there. It was already five minutes past the time of his talk, so he ran to his office to pick up his keys and then ran back and drove over. Only then did he realize that he could have walked the distance in less time than it took him to go back to his office for his keys.

This is a classic example of how stress interferes with our ability to perceive alternatives.

Because stress affects our thinking in so many ways, it is important that we keep it under control. A number of stress-management strategies can help us with this control, but we must first be aware that we are under stress. This is not always easy, for stress can accumulate so insidiously that we underestimate its extent. We may get clues, however, by observing ourselves and noting the signs and symptoms of stress and by listening to what our friends and loved ones say about us, such as, “What’s wrong with you lately? You’re not yourself.”

**SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS**

The following signs and symptoms may be indicative of stress. The list is by no means exhaustive. The more of these symptoms you have, the more stress you are likely to be suffering, although no two people respond to stress in exactly the same way. Bear in mind that although stress is a common cause of these ailments, other causes may be responsible.

**Cognitive Signs**

* **1.** Poor concentration
* **2.** Poor memory
* **3.** Paranoid thinking
* **4.** Low self-esteem, loss of self-confidence
* **5.** Nightmarish dreams
* **6.** Preoccupation with one idea or thought
* **7.** Constant worrying

**Emotional Signs**

* **1.** Depression
* **2.** Moodiness
* **3.** Irritability
* **4.** Anger
* **5.** Crying spells

**Physical Signs**

* **1.** Gastrointestinal problems
* **2.** Inability to feel relaxed
* **3.** Insomnia
* **4.** Fatigue
* **5.** Loss of appetite
* **6.** Ulcers
* **7.** Skin rashes
* **8.** More frequent colds
* **9.** Headaches
* **10.** Worsening of other physical problems
* **11.** Loss of sex drive

**Behavioral Signs**

* **1.** Withdrawal from others
* **2.** Intolerance of others
* **3.** Displaced aggression toward others
* **4.** Fidgeting behavior (pencil tapping, leg bouncing)
* **5.** Increase in bad habits (fingernail biting, smoking)
* **6.** Increase in facial and other tics
* **7.** Binge eating
* **8.** Increased use of alcohol

**Stress Management**

Once we know we are under stress, it is important to identify its source, being as specific as possible. Don’t settle for generalities like “life stresses me out.” That’s too vague to suggest a stress-management solution—suicide is not a viable option. By probing further we may find that it is not life itself that is the source of our stress, but perhaps it is the speech we have to give in two weeks or time pressures at work that is causing us strain. Or perhaps it is our children. But what about our children? Are they too noisy? Too demanding? Too disobedient? Do they require too much attention, or frequently get us up in the middle of the night? We need to be specific, for each situation requires a different approach to stress management.

Sometimes the source of our stress is ourselves, for we can easily be our own worst enemy. This inside source of stress can be our unrelenting need for perfection in everything we do, or our failure to put things in proper perspective, as when we make mountains out of molehills. Other times the source of our stress is outside our self. Noisy children, time pressures at work, or a failing relationship are examples.

In general, stress-management approaches fall into four major categories: (1) removing the outside source of stress, (2) removing the inside source of stress, (3) managing the body’s response to stress, and (4) preventing stress. Removing the outside source of stress would be appropriate when dealing with the stress of noisy children, for example. We could set an hour of quiet time every day, discard noisy toys or only allow them to be used outside, or install more doors and carpet. If the stress comes from the constant attention we must give a child in the middle of the night, the solution may be to ask one’s spouse to share in that responsibility by alternating nights. Again, the source of stress should be identified as specifically as possible. Often the appropriate stress-management approach will then become obvious.

If the outside source of stress cannot be removed, perhaps we can remove the inside source, which involves changing ourselves. Typically this means removing irrational ideas and expectations that give rise to our stress, and changing the meaning we give to the stressor. Often we can change the stressful meaning we give to life events by putting them in proper perspective. If we must give a speech, for example, we could ask ourselves, “What’s the worst that can realistically happen? Will I die?” Probably the worst would be to forget our speech and become embarrassed. Life goes on. In one week no one will remember anyway because people will be too busy with their own problems.

Putting a speech in proper perspective is one way to reduce its stress. Oftentimes this requires addressing and removing irrational ideas that underlie the speech anxiety. For example, we may be overly concerned about our upcoming speech because we believe that we must be perfect in everything we do, that everyone should like us, or that everyone is concerned about how we perform. All of these are irrational thoughts that must be challenged and replaced with more realistic ones.

Sometimes we can extend our perspective still wider to show how small our stressors really are. If we stop to think about how short our lives are and how small we are in this huge universe, certain concerns and worries dissolve away in insignificance. When we think about our Milky Way galaxy sitting in obscurity in the vastness of space among 130 billion others like it, with an average of 100 billion stars in each galaxy, with the total number of stars in these galaxies possibly exceeding the number of grains of sand on all the beaches on our planet, we can understand why the astronomer Carl Sagan referred to our home as only a speck in the cosmic dark, “a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam” (1994, p. 8). And when we think about how old our universe is (about 14 billion years), and how in comparison our life is shorter than that of a fruit fly, then maybe it does not matter any more that we are trapped behind a car going 34 miles per hour in a 35-mph zone, that our spouse doesn’t get the garbage out on time, that we are five minutes late for our meeting, or that our hair doesn’t look just right. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it:

Life is too short to waste

In critic peep or cynic bark,

Quarrel or reprimand;

’Twill soon be dark;

Up! mind thine own aim, and

God speed the mark!

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “*TO J.W*.”

If we cannot eliminate the source of stress and we cannot change the meaning we give to it, we can always manage our body’s response to stress through exercise, meditation, relaxation tapes, adequate rest, and proper nutrition. This reduces both the subjective feelings of stress and the deleterious effects stress can have on our physical and mental functioning. Exercise, meditation, or relaxation alone can sometimes be enough to remove the feelings of stress. Proper nutrition is important because stress rapidly removes essential vitamins, particularly the B complex, which are vital to healthy physical and mental functioning.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, we should think about ways that we can prevent stress in the first place. In most areas of life, prevention is much easier to accomplish than a cure. When our lives are already full of responsibilities and our free time is barely enough to meet our needs, we can turn down offers for extra work and refrain from volunteering on yet another committee. Thinking ahead will also help reduce stress: our umbrella will then be in the car on a rainy day, the car will have gas for our trip to work, and we will leave room in our schedule to attend our child’s school performance. In short, an extra car key and the word “no” will often do wonders.

**THINKING ACTIVITY 2.6 Five Ways to Prevent Stress**

By itself, reading about stress management will do nothing to prevent or reduce stress. Action is what is called for. In this activity, identify five things that you can do this week to prevent future stress. To get ideas, consider past stressors and the stresses of people in your family or at work. If you get stuck, consult a friend; they can often be invaluable thinking aids for getting your life back on track or keeping it from jumping rails in the first place.

* **1.**
* **2.**
* **3.**
* **4.**
* **5.**

Congratulations on completing this activity. Now it’s time to act on your ideas, for “the great end of life is not knowledge but action” (Huxley, [**1885**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/bm02bib90), p. 7).

**SUMMARY**

The extent to which we can think critically is strongly related to who we are. The enculturation process largely determines our prejudices and values, and our self-concept contains specific areas of sensitivity and weaknesses that motivate defensive thinking through the use of ego defenses and self-serving biases. Additionally, our schemata shape, restrict, and stereotype our perceptions and thinking. And depression, anger, passion, and stress can lead to irrational thoughts and poor judgment. Our thinking also seems to be affected by our need for consistency and balance among our thoughts and emotions.

All of these factors lead one to wonder about the extent to which human beings can be rational at all. Certainly, the more we engage in self-reflection and become aware of these biases and limitations, the more we are able to avoid them. Such awareness can help us identify our thinking biases and move our thinking in a healthier, more rational direction. Besides self-reflection, we can take specific actions to remove the causes of bad thinking. But transcending our personal barriers is not easy, and most of us do not completely remove them. Fortunately, better thinking does not require perfection, only one step at a time in the right direction.

**Barrier Challenges**

**1.**

List the favorite beer in your town or among your group. Is it your favorite as well? Why?

**2.**

Would you eat cow? Would people in India eat cow? Do you think it is okay to eat dog? Do you know any cultures in which they do eat dog?

**3.**

What does your religion teach you about the right way to think about contemporary issues such as abortion, the existence of God, euthanasia, working hard, and the role of women? In what other ways does your religion shape your values, beliefs, and attitudes?

**4.**

How has your hometown influenced you? To help you find out, write down how you might be different if you had been raised in the following cities: San Francisco, Des Moines, New York, Dallas, New Orleans.

**5.**

Investigate a major religion that is unfamiliar to you. How might people of that religion view your religious beliefs?

**6.**

How have your friends and school influenced your values?

**7.**

Is there anything unique about the people who live in your state compared with people in other states?

**8.**

Sometimes the people we hate most are those who have the trait we hate most in ourselves. Whom do you hate most? Why? Could that trait characterize you as well? If in doubt, ask others.

**9.**

When was the last time you rationalized? It’s easier to look back and see it than to identify it at the time it is happening.

**10.**

When was the last time you failed a test or a task at work? Did you use a self-serving bias to protect your self-esteem?

**11.**

We often see according to our expectations and beliefs. Is your perception of your instructor influenced by what you heard about him or her. Do significant people in your life complain that you fail to recognize their changed behavior and still perceive them as they used to be?

**12.**

When you are angry, do you typically say things that you don’t really mean? Do you tend to overgeneralize or catastrophize?

**13.**

Alexander Hamilton once said, “Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice, without constraint” (*The Federalist*). Do you agree with his statement? What would people’s behavior be like without a government? Can you find instances in history to support your answer?

**14.**

When you are depressed, which of Beck’s five thinking errors (see [**page 41**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781323010198/content/id/pg41)) tend to characterize your thinking?

**15.**

Have you ever experienced pressure to abandon a couple who broke up? Did you maintain allegiance to one and not the other? How have you and others you know handled such situations?

**16.**

Did you ever believe one way but act in another? How did you handle the apparent contradiction?

**17.**

What happens to your thinking under stress?

**18.**

Some people define themselves by their possessions, religious beliefs, or abilities. How do you define yourself? These are the topics about which you may have difficulty thinking objectively.

**19.**

What stereotypes do you tend to believe? Do you know people who do not fit these stereotypes? If you can’t find exceptions, ask your friends, family members, or college professors. You could also do research on these groups that you stereotype to learn about the diversity within those groups.

**20.**

Recall two or three times when you were angry. Which was worse: the situation that caused your anger or the consequences of venting your anger? Could you have done anything to control your anger?

**21.**

Have you ever met people who were fanatics? What was your impression about their thinking? Were they open to new ideas or challenges to their views? Were they good listeners?

**22.**

Oftentimes parents blame their children for their behaviors, while children blame their parents. How would the actor-observer bias explain this?