

# The brain and fear — and the mind's potential to work for us

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## **Taking Centre-Stage**

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### ✧ Common thinking distortions that hamper performance

Here is the rogues' gallery of fifteen distorted thinkers who can unnecessarily make performance a nightmare:

#### **1. Filtering**

'Fred Filter' suffers from tunnel vision. He magnifies the weaker, negative aspects of a performance, while filtering out all his positive achievements. He has an excellent memory when it comes to the glitches, hiccups, stumbles and uneven passages. However, he stares blankly when we compliment him on his clarity of articulation, the brilliance of his fingers in the Presto or his sensitive touch. He appears oblivious to his strengths.

*Antidote:* Fred, bite your tongue on adjectives like 'terrible', 'awful', 'poor' and on phrases like 'I'm no good.' Change the focus, clean the hearing aid and put away that magnifying glass! Tape some performances and listen back later when you can be more objective. Choose which comments, whose voices to take seriously. Bill, who rivals you on the same instrument, is less likely to build your confidence than a close, supportive friend.

#### **2. Polarised thinking**

'Claus Pohlman' from Jokkmokk thinks, like the Scandinavian winter scenery, in black and white. He extends this to absolutes of good and bad, success or failure. There *is* no middle ground. If the performance was not perfect, than a close, supportive friend. he groans, then he must be a failure. Might as well give up now and save any more heartbreak.

*Antidote:* Claus, try thinking in percentage. For example, 'About thirty per cent of me is shaking like a birch leaf in autumn, but seventy per cent is holding on and coping', 'I played ninety-five per cent right notes', or 'Five per cent of the time I'm ill-prepared, but other times I'm hard working.'

*Ask:* If the fish didn't bite today, does that mean you are a hopeless fisherman? (Didn't you catch a bucketful yesterday?)

### 3. Overgeneralisation

'Gena-Lisa', a soprano, makes sweeping conclusions based on a single incident and expects future repetitions. If a fiasco happens once, she expects it to be the norm. Because she missed the top note once, she now assumes it is not in her range and labels herself a mezzo soprano instead of soprano.

*Antidote:* Gena-Lisa, banish words such as 'every', 'none', 'nobody', 'never', 'all', 'everybody'. Encourage flexible thinking with words such as 'may', 'sometimes', 'often', 'in some cases'.

*Ask:* Is there any evidence for this? Does your teacher think you are a mezzo?

### 4. Mind reading

'Mia Reagan' makes snap judgments about why people act the way they do. She is sure those colleagues are thinking negative things about her — look how they're frowning. That's why she was not asked to read a paper at the conference.

*Antidote:* Ask yourself: Have they actually said anything? Is there any evidence? Perhaps ask them for reassurance, especially if they are generally positive people.

### 5. Catastrophising

'Cathy Micawber' always thinks the worst. You see her holding her breath, just waiting for disaster. Her speech is littered with 'What ifs?' A thundercloud of gloom encircles her.

*Antidote:* 'Er, Ms Micawber, did your flu really develop into pneumonia? Did the accompanist *really* forget her music? I thought you said the world was scheduled to end last Tuesday.

### 6. Personalisation

'Percy' relates everything to himself, constantly comparing himself with others. 'She can play that Scherzo faster than me; I'm just no good.' If that person in the front row looks glum, he assumes she dislikes his performance, when actually her mother died last week.

*Antidote:* Remember the words of the Desiderata: 'If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.' You are unique... so be yourself. Check any evidence for your assumptions.

### 7. Control fallacies

There are two twins in this case. On the one hand, 'Falkner' views himself as being helpless, a victim of fate. Whereas his sister 'Constance' (older by ten minutes) thinks herself omnipotent and responsible for those around her, carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders.

Much as Falkner appreciates Constance's concern and kindness, he wishes she would realise that she cannot be responsible for everyone. Falkner wants to live his own life, make his own mistakes.

When concertmaster of an orchestra, my husband noticed that he was hampered by a tendency to shoulder all the blame when the rest of the section played poorly or neglected their preparation of parts. This became an unnecessary burden.

*Antidote:* Think: I make it happen; I am responsible for myself, my colleagues for themselves. This is *my* life.

(We are not Siamese twins, for goodness sake!)

## **8. Fallacy of fairness**

'Fairley Fallaseter' tries to apply legal or contractual rules to the vagaries of her personal relationships, often making conditional assumptions: 'If she really believed me to be a good singer, she would have asked me to sing at her wedding.' Or: 'If I really had talent, I'd be playing principal, not second' — not to mention her love life!

As other people rarely see the situation in the same way, she is constantly hurt by their reactions. In fact, her favourite word 'fair' is a misnomer for what she wants from them and from life.

*Antidote:* Fairley, try being honest with yourself and with others by saying this is what you 'want', not what is 'fair'.

## **9. Fallacy of change**

'Charlie Fallaseter', Fairley's spoilt kid brother, expects other people to change if he pressures them enough by blaming, withholding, demanding, trading, or arguing. He pressures audition panels and casting directors to give him lead roles — then undermines the more successful actors. Name it, he knows all the tricks in the book. He turns his disappointments on others, too, thinking that his happiness depends on the actions of others (whereas it depends on the thousands of small and large decisions he makes through his life).

*Antidote:* Tell him: Your happiness depends on *you* and the many large and small decisions you make throughout your life. You are responsible for yourself I am responsible for me.

## **10. Emotional reasoning**

'Emma Rease' believes that what she feels must be true. If she *feels* clumsy or slow or incompetent, then of course she *is* clumsy or slow or incompetent. Regardless of what we tell her, she won't listen. She lives a depressed life, for she relies heavily on her emotions.

*Antidote:* Feelings can lie, so examine them before allowing them to control you.

## **11. Global labelling**

'Gloria' generalises one or two qualities into a sweeping negative global judgment, taking a grain of truth to mean the whole picture. Thus she labels that introverted oboist with a sweet but small tone 'dumb', the director a 'bully and megalomaniac'. These judgments are usually false because they focus on a single characteristic or behaviour, but imply that it's the whole picture.

*Antidote:* Ask yourself: 'Is my description always true, true only now, or true only some of the time?' Be specific.

## **12. Blaming**

'Billy Blainey' is adept at making other people responsible for his inadequacies, faults and decisions. Thus it was his teacher's fault that he was not ready for the audition. His sister Bella, on the other hand, blames herself for everything, constantly knocking herself as incompetent and always ill-prepared, no matter how she slaves at practising. She would never enter a competition because she could not imagine winning.

*Antidote:* Both types of blaming can be covered by this statement: 'I am responsible for my own decisions. I accept that I made a mistake. I don't have to be perfect.'

## **13. 'Shoulds'**

'Sheila's' conversation is peppered with words like 'should' and 'ought', revealing too rigid, inflexible rules. She feels guilty if she doesn't measure up to her high standards and angry with those who break the rules. 'I should never have made a silly mistake like that! If only I had got out of bed an hour earlier to warm-up more. Peter should never have won that debate; he did so little work.'

*Antidote:* Be flexible in rules and values, for there are always exceptional and special circumstances. Think of three exceptions to your rule. Ban the words 'should', 'ought' and 'must'. We cannot expect everyone to live by our rules, even if we feel they are the best ones.

## **14. 'Being right'**

'Ben' is compelled to prove continually that his ideas and actions are correct. He is defensive and hates to be proven wrong. (Who, me? Wrong notes in the fugue? Rubbish! You're tone-deaf; how would you know?')

Selective deafness results from the need to be always right and his relationships suffer because colleagues resent these attitudes.

*Antidote:* Listen to others! Most situations contain many possibilities and many answers.

## **15. 'Heaven's reward' fallacy**

'Martha Martyr' has slaved at her career, her responsibilities, on the understanding that all the hard work, sacrifice and self-denial must pay off in the 'ever after'. She practises endlessly, diligently doing the 'right' things, like several hours' scale practice before breakfast. She is such a burned-out wreck physically and emotionally that she cannot project musically in concerts and so does not reap the benefits of her work.

*Antidote:* Don't drag on with activities which drain you without spending some time each day to replenish by enjoyment. Live in the present, and seek satisfaction also in relationships and recreation.

## ❖ How our mind can work for us

When we become aware of distorted automatic thoughts, we don't have to let them overgrow our minds like noxious fungus. We can acknowledge them, which is far preferable to sweeping them into a dark corner and hoping that they will shrivel and die. Then block them with proactive positive thoughts like:

- ❖ 'I don't have to think this. I've allowed my thoughts to get into this rut.' Or try a Shakespearean touch: 'Out, vile thought.'
- ❖ Blot out the thoughts by thinking positive affirmations, or just repeating one word over and over such as *'blah, blah, blah'*
- ❖ Mentally think 'Stop!' to block thoughts — or shout it aloud if necessary.