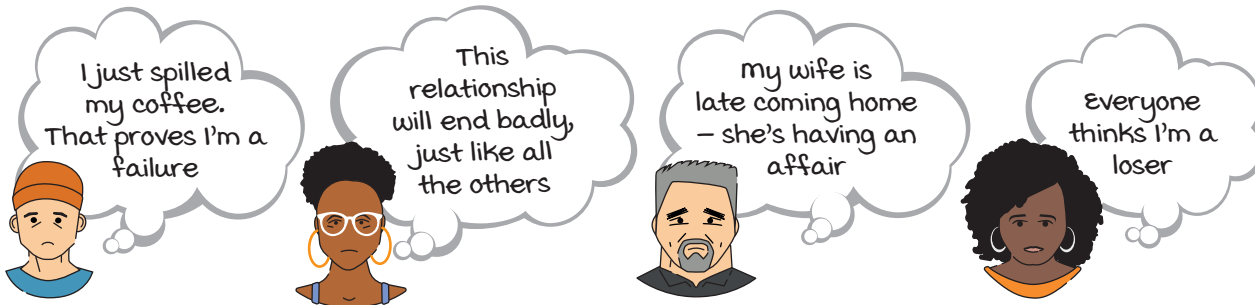


When we feel strong emotions – such as fear, sadness, shame, or hopelessness – we have often just had an *automatic thought*. These thoughts can happen so quickly and effortlessly that we are not even aware we've had them. It can take practice to notice them as they arise. Automatic thoughts often feel convincing, but they are not always 100% accurate.

They are often *exaggerated, biased, distorted, or unrealistic*. There are different types of biases, which psychologists call *cognitive distortions* or *unhelpful thinking styles*. We all think in exaggerated ways sometimes, but it can become a problem if your thoughts are distorted very often or very strongly.

Arbitrary inference (also known as 'jumping to conclusions') is a style of thinking where you reach a conclusion without any evidence to support it, or when the evidence suggests the opposite is true. These inferences might include assumptions about what other people are thinking ('mind reading'), things that will happen in the future ('fortune telling'), or the meaning of events.



Arbitrary inference are common across a wide range of problems.

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Bipolar disorder
- Body dysmorphia
- Delusional beliefs
- Depression
- Perfectionism
- PTSD
- Psychosis
- Relationship difficulties
- Suicidality

Overcoming arbitrary inferences

Noticing and labeling

The first step in overcoming your arbitrary inferences is to catch them. Practice *self-monitoring* so that you can spot these thoughts as they arise. When you notice one, say something to yourself like:

- "I'm making an arbitrary inference again."
- "I'm jumping to conclusions again."



Collect some data

We often assume that arbitrary inferences are accurate. Test them out by collecting some data. For example, you could:

- Investigate the situation: can you find any facts that don't support your conclusion?
- Take a risk: do your predictions come true?
- Get some feedback: do people think the things you believe they do?
- make a list of times when your arbitrary inferences turned out not to be true



Evaluate your thinking

There are lots of ways of judging any situation. Practice putting your thoughts in perspective by asking yourself these questions:

- "Can I be 100% sure the conclusion I've made is accurate? Why not?"
- "What are the other ways I could think about this situation?"
- "If I were an objective bystander, would I reach a different conclusion?"
- "What would I say to a friend if they had this thought?"



Weigh up the pros and cons

Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of your arbitrary inferences. You may find that jumping to conclusions is doing more harm than good.

- "my colleagues at work think I'm incompetent..."
- "...That might or might not be true, but thinking that won't help me do my job."

