

PITFALLS TO CLEAR THINKING



Emotions

Sometimes we think poorly when we are nervous, angry, excited, frustrated, frightened, or under pressure. Often our desires get in the way of clear thinking. Acknowledging our emotions is a valid, important part of the thinking process, but unfortunately, those same emotions can also interfere.

Habits

Often we do not even notice that we have a choice because we make it so habitually. Habitual thinking is useful unless it becomes a substitute for clear thinking.

Functional Fixedness

This is a tendency to see only one point of view, rather than several alternatives. Examples would be: "Math is for the classroom, not practical in my everyday life;" "A woman's place is in the home or in a secretarial position;" or "This course is over so I'll never need to open that book again." Functional fixedness leads us to ignore other possibilities, other uses or other solutions beyond the very obvious.

Self-Confidence

Our belief in ourselves dramatically affects our thinking. If we are externally controlled, we look to others, to fate, or somewhere else for our decisions; we feel no control over our lives. We have no faith in our own abilities and see little need to think through our own decisions. If we are internally controlled and have a sense of our own capability, we may more often think things through since the choice is ours alone. We have more confidence in our ability to make choices.

Laziness

Thinking is often hard work. Many of us are tempted to do the easiest thing or to let someone else think it through because active thinking seems to be too much trouble.

Not Knowing Where to Start

The situation facing us sometimes seems so confusing, unfamiliar, or threatening that we don't know where to begin. We can freeze and go blank, become immediately frustrated and give up, or do the wrong thing.

Time

Often we must think choices through in a few seconds or minutes. We can use our thinking tools in that short span of time, but it still hampers us in many ways, such as by limiting the amount of information we can get and use.

Information Flaws

Sometimes we have too little information or the wrong information. Often our thinking is hampered by uncertainty over what relevant information we do or do not have. All of us have observed others making decisions while unaware they are missing some vital information. Knowing what we do not know is a key to using information for thinking.

Apparent Lack of Mental Tools

Even when we seem to know what needs to be done in thinking through a problem, we can feel crippled by not knowing how to go about it.

These factors hamper all of us in our thinking. Some of them interfere mainly with our ability to think clearly. Most of them, however, interfere more with our willingness to think clearly.

Conscious, effective thinking depends on both of these factors: the ability and the will.