



Working Consciously With "Mind Traps"

by Suzanne Matthiessen

Mindfulness practice is not about stopping our thoughts. That's simply impossible. It does include becoming aware of the *types* of thoughts we have, and the subsequent *effects* of our unconscious thinking processes - so that we can catch ourselves before mind traps snare us and have a **negative impact internally and externally**. Mindful awareness offers us the ability to assess thoughts without judgment, and notice that much of the time our thoughts are not really serving us. Many thoughts are driven by fear and lock us into insecurity.

The most common mind traps people get caught in are: catastrophizing, rumination, exaggeration negatives/discounting positives, "all or nothing" thinking, mind reading, the "shoulds", the blame game, constant complaining, toxic perfectionism, and negative self-talk and self deception.

The Big Picture problem with continually stepping into mind traps is they drain our power and energy and keep us from being who we really want to be in **all** areas of our life.

The good news is that each of us has the power to change our *mindset*, which in turn, changes our *behavior*. One of the biggest realizations students express when they begin to be proactive with their mindfulness practice is: **"I realized I don't have to believe everything I think."** Each of us can always *choose differently*.

I discuss each mind trap below and offer some alternative choices.

Catastrophizing

This is when we imagine the worst-case scenario outcome – auto-pilot reactively going from 0 to 60 in our head in the blink of an eye. It's the “what if” game - and predicting things going terribly wrong in the future. It may be five minutes from now or perhaps several years down the road.

Examples of the "What Ifs?":

“What if I don't do it *perfectly*?”

“What if I get fired?”

“What if my ?”

"What if that noise I'm hearing in the engine is a serious problem?"

It can be about your job, family, car problems, financial, political, personal performance - just imagining the worst – when the truth is you *don't know*. What do you notice happening as you worry about one thing? Do you tend to stay focused on that one thing - or do you begin to worry and catastrophize about other things as well? I call this compulsive *mind spin* that just keeps painting a bleaker and bleaker picture.

You may have heard the saying “What we focus on expands.” That isn't some New Age woo-woo. When we focus on the worst thing happening, or how bad things are, or how crummy we feel, **logically**, how can we expect to see new pathways of possibility to manage the stressors in our life? How you think influences how you feel about yourself, about others, and life in general. Remember: we will always have stress and challenging events that we have no control over happening – yet we do have control – **choice** – as to how we *deal* with them, and our thoughts are a huge component in dealing with stress in a way that doesn't make things worse.

Alternative: If you catastrophize: Do self-inquiry on the thoughts: Are they *really* true? What can you do to check in with reality? 1. Focus on the present moment. What is actually happening *now*? 2. Just because we are having a negative projection about the future does not mean we are helpless to that outcome. No matter what is happening, even if the worst-case scenario *does take* place, by applying mindfulness skills can **choose** what to do next to address the situation with greater clarity and equanimity. 3. We can check our thoughts for accuracy and notice our cognitive distortions with a spirit of learning and growth – and even a sense of humor.

Rumination:

"Would, Could, Shoulda" – obsessively digging a deep groove in your mind about the past. Playing scenarios over and over again in your mind with regret, remorse, and/or flavors of negative emotions. Losing sleep because you replay past events over and over in your mind.

Alternative: You cannot change what happened in the past. You **can** change how you respond to it. Choose to let go of what you cannot change. Learn from your experiences and bring that wisdom into the present. Don't deny your upset or difficult emotions – however, acknowledge if they are eating you alive and causing you to perpetuate pain and suffering within, and **own** the adverse impact that has on yourself and everyone that enters your sphere of influence. Let go of the past having power

over you in the present. Refuse to engage in rumination with others who are caught in this trap, but don't dismissively judge others who are stuck.

And when and if it is appropriate, extend forgiveness toward yourself and the other imperfect human being(s) in the situation; bearing in mind that anyone who inflicts pain and suffering externally is *most likely* experiencing pain and suffering internally. We often don't know what another person's life has brought them through; however a life riddled with a long chain of adverse internal and external stressors can understandably cause people to do horrible things in reaction to them.

Extending forgiveness and compassion doesn't mean we agree with the actions that took place or will enable them; it means we are not going to allow them to run (or ruin) our life. Forgiving a person does not mean you excuse their *behavior*. Give yourself permission to let go of all of the mental and emotional baggage that you may have been carrying around for *years*.

Exaggerating Negative Details and Discounting the Positive are styles of thinking that go hand in hand and contribute to depressed mood and anxiety. This is where you reject all positive experiences insisting that they don't count and magnify the negative details. This is often done when you say something positive, then say the word "but," and then say something negative. For example, "I got an A on my test BUT I didn't get them **all** correct!" you discount any positive and give more power to the negative. It would be more accurate to replace the "but" with "and," giving both equal weight.

Do you allow yourself to receive compliments well - or recognize and take a moment to celebrate when you've done something well? Many of us discount when someone gives us praise and focus instead where we could improve or where we want to change. It's important to own what you've got (talents, skills, gifts, etc.) and take pride in what you have earned via your efforts with a sense of accomplishment *and* authentic humility (not false modesty).

Alternative: Practice accepting praise from others, practice recognizing and giving yourself a well-earned pat of the back. Celebrate successes of all sizes and let go of the "BUTS". No matter what may be happening, take time to focus on what you are grateful for in life. This can help balance your experience.

"All or Nothing" Thinking

This is when you see everything in terms of black and white and there is no gray area. It is "Us vs. Them" thinking that welcomes in - and perpetuates - fear, paranoia, and even hatred. Your mind is so rigid and full of your opinions and beliefs there is no room for seeing different perspectives and possibilities. This furthers division and allows unconscious biases to grow unchecked. It feeds the *scavenger dog* of the ego mind that focuses on differences and makes dismissive judgments that often have no factual basis. "Know-it-all" thinking also falls under this heading.

Alternative:

Empty your rice bowl:

Once upon a time, an academic scholar came to study with mindfulness teacher and asked her to teach him how to become more mindful. He boasted about his extensive academic education and

spoke on and on about the different philosophies he had become a scholar of, teaching them at many distinguished universities. He doubted there was anything else he needed to learn, yet decided a little mindfulness instruction might be like icing on the cake of his "enlightened" wisdom. The teacher listened patiently while cooking a pot of rice. When it was ready, she spooned rice into the scholar's cup until it began to overflow and fall onto the floor.

The scholar saw what was happening and shouted, "Stop, stop! The bowl is full; you can't get any more in. The teacher stopped spooning the rice and said: "You are like this bowl; you are full of yourself and all your ideas and concepts and beliefs. You come and ask for teaching, but your bowl is full; I can't put anything in. Before I can teach you, you'll have to empty your bowl."

We can become so full of **ourselves** with our own knowledge, ideas and opinions and so trapped by old mental patterns and conditioning that we've filled ourselves up to the brim and nothing else can get in. Mindful awareness allows us to observe the mental conditioning and belief systems we've been taught, and how they keep us from seeing new possibilities and ways of being and doing. Mindful awareness allows us to apply wise discernment, not dismissive judgment. We can question if what we've thought has any basis in fact, and if it is furthering "Us vs. Them" division and incivility instead of respecting differences.

Whenever you catch yourself with a no room left in the rice bowl of your awareness, remember this quote from Suzuki Roshi: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities - but in the expert's there are few."

Mind Reading

Do you have the special ability of mind reading? Have a psychic hotline? When we don't know what someone is thinking, it is a universal human experience to attempt fill in the blanks by speculating and projecting. What do we fill in the blanks with though? Probably something that has nothing to do with reality. We may spend so much time imagining all sorts of different possibilities - and often they are incorrect. It wastes our time, distracts our focus, drains our energy and increases our stress (negative thoughts and feelings)...but it doesn't typically land us at the truth! Do we *really* know what others are thinking unless we ask? Mind reading causes us to assume things - and often that can make an Ass out of U and Me.

Do you expect others to be able to read **your** mind? If you can't read theirs you can't expect anyone to be able read **yours** either. But how often to you unrealistically expect that to happen?

Alternative: 1. Remind yourself that you cannot know what another person is thinking without asking them. ASK questions! Communicate! If the matter or person is important, don't hide your head in the sand and expect a problem to magically go away. Value yourself enough to ask, assert. 2. Or, determine if it is even worth asking. How important is it? 3. Ask or practice "letting go" and not sweating the small stuff.

The "Shoulds"

We make rules for everyone including ourselves. If we break a rule we feel guilty. If someone else breaks the rule we feel angry. Why are having "shoulds" a problem or a mind trap? Sometimes these rules are quite arbitrary or were learned a long time ago and are not relevant any longer. They may

be generating stress unnecessarily. Sometime a "should" is actually more of a preference or an opinion. Nothing horrible will happen if the "should" is not followed perfectly. Let's take the classic toilet paper roll example. Everyone has a way they *think* is best for how the toilet paper "should" roll out - over or under. Relationships end over this - as it is a "shoulds" Deal Breaker for many new couples! What happens when you see it the "wrong" way - say at someone's house or a hotel room - do you feel you like want or - even have to - to change it? Is it really worth being stressed about?

Alternative: 1. Challenge the "should" for accuracy. What is the **true** consequence if the "should" is not followed? 2. Is it a preference instead of a "should"? If it is a preference you can practice changing your language... "I would like, I would prefer." 3. Again, practice letting go - especially when it's the small stuff.

The Blame Game

Blaming can go both ways. We may blame another person or hold them responsible for our issues and unhappiness - and that keeps us locked into a mental prison with them - we may even give them the power to ruin our day - or even our life! We can become "poor me" victims with no power, holding our "pity parties" and inviting people into our drama, constantly complaining instead of **choosing** to move forward in life. Blaming someone for a challenge we are facing, our mood ... or blaming someone for something we are not able to have ... like success, a job opportunity, a project running well. On the flip side: we may blame ourselves for another person's problems. "If I were a better friend" ... "If I were a better parent" ... Focusing on blame and guilt takes away your ability to make new choices or to be creative at problem solving. It keeps you stuck in the quicksand of drama - and drama only pays well if you are on a reality TV show.

The ego mind is like a *scavenger dog* that zeroes in on mistakes and imperfections, magnifies them, and often sinks its teeth in so deep it refuses to let go. It focuses on any scrap of "evidence" that perpetuates guilt and shame, prompting us to *dismissively* judge and justify attacking another (or yourself). It is a *negative contagion*, and we see it all the time on social media where people are knee jerk reacting, are very mean spirited and in constant attack mode - and have no impulse control or remorse for their hurtful words.

Alternative: 1. Identify where blaming has become an unproductive pattern in life. Are there any areas that blame is keeping you stuck? 2. Practice empathy, compassion and letting go of the past. 3. Focus on a positive step you could take. 4. Forgive yourself and others as appropriate. 5. Refuse to engage in the blame game with others who are stuck in the mire, but don't dismissively judge others who are stuck. Lead by compassionate yet assertive example.

Constant Complaining

Someone who constantly complains doesn't follow that adage, "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade" - they just complain about the quality of the lemons. Everyone complains and vents from time-to-time, but if you are a constant complainer you always see the negative in everyone and everything, and often have little sense of gratitude. Nothing is ever good enough - situations, restaurant meals, people - actually pretty much everything. Constant complainers are the "Negative Nancys" and "Debbie Downers" of the world, and the vortex of their energy is debilitating. They go kicking and screaming and whining and moaning all through life - and wonder why things aren't

going well for them, as it's clearly (in their mind) "everybody else" and not **them** who has a problem. It can lead to Toxic Perfectionism – the next item on the list.

Alternative: If this is you, the best antidote is learning to be grateful. Accepting "what is" – even if you don't like it – puts you in a non-adversarial relationship with everyone and everything, and allows you to see the good, discover new possibilities, and simply be more pleasant to be around.

Toxic Perfectionism

Perfectionism is defined by Webster's dictionary as "a disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable." When we allow perfectionism into our hearts and lives it becomes toxic to our souls. Toxic perfectionists judge themselves and others to an impossible standard. Many are paralyzed into not completing assignments and tasks because they feel it won't be *perfect*.

Perfectionism pervades our culture. Actors, celebrities, athletes, etc. are all expected to be **perfect**. The American media attacks any hint of imperfection. Living in our media-saturated culture promotes our own perfectionism and causes us to attack ourselves when we inevitably fall short.

To understand the dangers of perfectionism, *Psychology Today* says: "For perfectionists, life is an endless report card on accomplishments or looks. It's a fast track to unhappiness, and perfectionism is often accompanied by depression and eating disorders. What makes perfectionism so toxic is that while those in its grip desire success, they are most focused on avoiding failure, so theirs is a negative orientation. And love isn't a refuge; in fact, it feels way too conditional on performance. The need for perfection is usually transmitted in small ways from parents to children, some as silent as a raised eyebrow over a B rather than an A."

Perfectionists are also more likely to be binge eaters, research in 2009 in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found. The rigidity of their perfectionism influences the rigidity of their dieting, so they set themselves impossible goals of cutting out entire food groups or subsisting on extreme low-calorie diets," says Roz Shafran, professor of psychology at University College London and author of *Overcoming Perfectionism*. "When they are unable to fit the rigid goals they set for themselves, they binge. Eating can calm them momentarily, but that leads to shame and guilt and more rigid control, so the cycle continues."

Dr. Don Miguel Ruiz wrote, "We form an image of what perfection is in order to try to be good enough. We create an image of how we should be in order to be accepted by everybody. We especially try to please the ones who love us, like mom and dad, big brothers and sisters, the priests and the teacher. We create this image, but the image is not real. We are never going to be perfect from this point of view. Not being perfect, we reject ourselves. And the level of self-rejection depends upon how effective the adults were in breaking our integrity. We cannot forgive ourselves for not being perfect."

Alternative:

"Mindfulness practice reveals how pervasive this pressure to be perfect is, and how I impose perfectionistic rules on myself. I'm happier when I give myself permission to be imperfect. I'm not a brain surgeon, accountant, or engineer. I don't need to be that precise. My perfectionistic expectations

are for spoken words in conversations, written words on the page, accomplishing items on my to-do list, and the quality of my mind's moment-by-moment functioning." - Arnie Kozak, clinical assistant professor in psychiatry at the University of Vermont College of Medicine.

Mindfulness practices allow our minds to have a **choice**. At the moment in which you pause and realize that these thoughts are not really serving you ("not useful"), you have the option to come back to the present moment and choose not to fall into the same old traps. This process of choosing becomes more powerful as you realize how inaccurate thoughts can create stress, suffering and separation. They create dismissive judgment and end up making us feel bad about ourselves and the people we care about. So instead you now have the choice to engage in more productive thinking that allows you to move forward toward your goals, be more successful at work and home, improve your relationships, and decrease your stress.

Instead of chasing after perfectionism (with a boat load of toxic, self-defeating thoughts coming along for the ride), consider choosing the impeccability of a Noble Warrior.

From a column I wrote back in 2006 titled "Impeccability":

We are human beings, and by definition imperfect. Trying to be perfect can drive you crazy with anxiety and annoy everyone you come in contact with -- as it creates separation and fosters judgment and elitism. It's easy to mistake the concept of "impeccability" with perfectionism, but they're vastly different in that anyone who seeks to be perfect generally comes from an egoic place, and the one whose goal is impeccability comes from an exceptionally humble place. Impeccability is about living a life of mindful, accountable choice, always aware that none of us is certain how much time we have on this planet, and that every moment, every thought, every communication, every action **matters** in terms of our own personal evolution in the time we're given. With impeccability, mistakes are owned and corrections and amends made simply as a code of honorable behavior, as there is no desire to waste time being defensive or berating ourselves. Mistakes are opportunities to grow wiser and emotionally stronger in life, and teach us empathy, compassion. and interconnection. How boring and lonely being perfect must be!

Impeccability is about paying attention to what is going on all around us and within us, and not being lazy on any level. It is not deluding ourselves with the ignorant narcotic notion that there are choices without consequence, and owning the fact that denial and blame are useless and ultimately rather petty. Impeccability does not allow us to be self-involved or self-indulgent and carry on as victims or entitled spoiled brats. It is the framework for a life lived with constantly mindful self-discipline and inner strength, because, as I have stated many times before, it is not enough to have knowledge or good intentions.

The words of teacher A. Hameed Ali reflect the many dimensions of living a life of impeccability: "Choosing to be an impeccable warrior means choosing to be a person, choosing to be a responsible adult, instead of being your mother's baby. There is dignity in it; you are your own person, your life is your responsibility and you always have the choice to do your best. Impeccability can be in action, in feeling, in thinking. Impeccability can be in terms of the will, in terms of the mind, in terms of the heart."

In other words, it is an all-encompassing focus on aligning yourself with who you wish to be and

what you wish to reflect on a consistent basis. Living impeccably means there is no gap between what you project to believe and how you act, as there is no room for hypocrisy whatsoever. It means being a person of your word, and someone that can be counted on to always show up with integrity no matter what the situation.

Negative Self-Talk and Self Deception

Several of the above examples fall into the negative self-talk category. I often ask people if they consider themselves violent people, and the answer is always "no." Then I ask them if they beat themselves up mentally, and more often than not, I get a "yes" answer.

Negative self-talk is committing violence against yourself. It is our ego mind turned against ourselves, and generally revolves around some flavor of "not good enough." It is reinforced by external cues from the people whose opinions matter to us, and in some cases, results in approval addiction and constant attention seeking – both attempts to fill some self-perceived hole or deficit. Over time, beating yourself up for everything you think you're not (smart enough, attractive enough, thin enough, proficient enough, wealthy enough, etc.) erodes your sense of self-worth and can drive you into maladaptive coping behaviors and depression.

Self-deception is perhaps the most insidious of all negative self-talk. *The lies we tell ourselves* may feel comforting in the moment; however, deep inside we *know* the truth. Yet when we deny reality – "what is" – and believe fantasies, falsehoods, and what we **want to hear** as opposed to **what truly is**, we create dissociation within – which can be likened as some form of a split personality.

Sometimes the lies we tell ourselves help us to justify compromising our integrity. But the truth is, nobody *really* gets away with anything, even when we think no one is looking. **We** know.

What lies do you tell yourself regularly? How fearful are you of the truth in each situation? How is this adversely affecting your life: your interactions with others, your work, your loved ones ... and your physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing?

Alternative:

The simple answer here is to adopt a mindset of a Noble Warrior. Keep in mind the Golden Rule and treat others (and yourself!) with all the respect, patience, compassion, understanding, honesty, and kindness you want to be given to you. When you realize you have hurt others by your actions or words, go make amends and stop living a life you have to defend or apologize for. When you find yourself beating yourself up or indulging in false humility, **stop it**. When you find yourself trying to seek approval from outside sources for everything you do, work on developing healthy self-worth. If you simply accept what any person or group says without carefully pondering if it is truthful and valid, take time to investigate and own your own mind. When you find yourself primarily thinking about what *you* want and need in a relationship, put on the other person's shoes. If you find yourself compulsively attracted to getting caught up in cheap, petty dramas, ask yourself what are you getting out of it? When you find yourself making *really great excuses* as to why something won't work so you won't even try, consider taking the risk anyway.