

Are you thinking wrong?

©2013 AgilityFlix All Rights Reserved Andrea can be reached at www.agilityflix.net

This article is an extension of my last one called “What the heck is a mental model (and why would I care)?”. **This article describes the patterns of thinking that are known to interfere with elite performance.**

Not surprisingly, if some of these thought processes come naturally to you, you’ll need to practice some new thinking - just like you practice timing and footwork. There are many, many sources of more detailed information about sports psychology and mental management available, and this is just a summary of some of the pieces that I think particularly interesting to agility performance.

Cognitive distortions are detrimental to elite performance because they interfere with your perception of the world and the action that you take as a result. In addition, they can directly interfere with your actual performance in the ring via the mental models that I wrote about previously and via the stress-induced anxiety they create.

The first step in eliminating these distortions is to become aware of the thinking patterns that undermine your performance. When you catch yourself in this faulty thinking, you can challenge yourself to think differently and you can immediately lessen the impact of those patterns. And because you will be practicing more productive ways of thinking, you’ll get better at them over time.

If you recognize some of these patterns - great! That is the first step in changing them. If you don’t recognize some of these patterns - great! You are ahead of the game already.

All or nothing: This is where you distort reality and summarize things in your head as “always” and “never”. For example: “She never gets the tunnel in a discrimination”. This type of thinking tends to magnify the stress of something that is an issue and make it much bigger than it really is. If you catch yourself thinking this way, practice making a point to look for evidence that better describes reality. For example, if I forced myself to look for evidence, and did some experiments, and wrote down notes about practice, I might notice more subtle

patterns of when I ran into trouble on discriminations. Perhaps “always” isn’t quite true and I could refine my cues or reinforcement, or if it was, I might find some pretty big holes in my training or maybe even a physical issue that I could address. Either way, taking productive action would tend to reduce the “neverland” of stress.

Overgeneralization: This is where you take isolated events and assume that all future events are impacted by it. Let’s say your dog pops out of the weave poles, so in trying to understand why, you notice that the poles were striped with purple tape which none of your practice weaves have - so you overgeneralize that your dog doesn’t like purple stripes and develop a stress about how the poles are striped for future events. If you catch yourself overgeneralizing, try describing your theory to a good friend, someone who you can laugh with. Try coming up with other plausible explanations and see if something else could explain what you are seeing. Do some experiments to try to identify what is really happening. If you really think the stripes are a problem, make the investment in paint and train through it - otherwise you’ll have to challenge yourself to let it go when you catch yourself dwelling on an overgeneralization.

Jumping to conclusions: This is where your brain conclude something (often negative) and then looks for evidence to support it rather than letting the evidence lead you to a logical conclusion. If you catch yourself jumping to conclusions, try the same things as I recommended for overgeneralization. In addition, try asking yourself why you feel as if you need to conclude something. What does it do for you? Does it influence your training plan? Does it change your goals? Does it add to your understanding of the application of some handling maneuver? By critiquing the value to you of your conclusion, you might be able to find a more productive and accurate perspective for the evidence at hand.

Yes, but: There are three kinds of thinking that are closely related so I’m going to clump them together. This category is a favorite of folks I know in agility. Recognize that you have a choice in what you focus on. It’s not that you don’t notice the negatives, but the weight that you give them is a choice. Try practicing being grateful and noticing things that are positive in yourself, your dog, your competitors, the venue etc. Go out of your way to notice things that are neutral or positive, using all of your senses. Catch yourself putting yourself into situations where you practice this faulty thinking - it is a favorite way to pass the time at an agility trial - and realize that it is damaging to elite performance.

Filtering: where you tend to gloss over positive events and hold a magnifying lens to the negative.

Disqualifying the positive: where you tend to treat positive events like a fluke, which works to maintain a more negative view of the world than is realistic and also tends to encourage you to have low expectations for the future.

Magnification and minimization: where your brain distorts the emphasis of something positive (minimizes) and exaggerates something negative even to the point of imagining and then expecting the worst possible scenario.

Emotional reasoning: This is where you mistake your emotional state about something as evidence of reality which in turn enables you to ignore facts. “I’m feeling completely overwhelmed by this course, therefore it must be impossible to qualify on”. Try taking your conclusion and work backwards by asking why. “this course is impossible!” Why? because it has too many front crosses. The answer to why can help you direct your emotional energy toward something that you can think about that may be more productive. In this case, you might be triggered to look at other handling options, or look at how you could use your available real estate to get to some of the front crosses or you might just stand off to the side and observe other folks for a bit. If you truly feel it is impossible to qualify on - what a great way to destress - no need to try to, just run it purely for fun. Be aware, that this kind of thinking is another fun social activity but it can come at a price to your performance.

Should thinking: This is where your brain sets rules about your behavior that are inflexible and puts you under stress trying to live up to these self-imposed expectations. Try replacing “should” with “want to” and see how you feel about your description of what you “should” be doing. Recognizing that you have a choice in what you think you should do, enables you to exist in a much-less stressful reality. Rehearsing the idea that “I want to work on contacts this week” is much more likely to get you out there than “I should work contacts”. In addition, noticing that “I want to work on contacts this week, but I am choosing to take the week off” is a much better reflection of reality, than over “shoulding”.

Labeling (and mislabeling): This is where your mental model over simplifies something to the point of being one-dimensional, especially detrimental if you label yourself (but also applies to labeling others) as it forces you into a role that doesn’t always apply and prevents you from seeing possibilities. “I am a clutz on course” would be an example. Try replacing a label with a reality check of where you are with your skills right now. “I’m working on perfecting my front cross footwork” is a better way to think about improving your performance than labeling yourself as a clutz.

Personalization: This is where you personalize your stressors and tend to blame yourself for things over which you have no control. This also applies to blaming your dog. The general theme is that expending energy and thought blaming someone/something doesn’t usually have the effect of directing you to productive action. It can be overwhelming and discouraging and can distract you from the things you do have control over. If you catch yourself blaming yourself for something, try redirecting that thought to something that you

can do something about and make a plan to take action. Even a small step in a positive direction can give you something to build on.