

# Reality testing - How our thoughts impact our success

Reality testing is the ability to assess a situation for what it is, rather than the way we wish or fear them to be.

- Example:** “I just failed my first midterm. That means I am going to fail the rest of my midterms”.

**Reality:** One poorly written midterm doesn’t necessarily mean your remaining midterms will be failures.
- Example:** “I just said ‘Hi’ to Emma in the hall. She didn’t answer. She must be mad at me”.

**Reality:** There may be other explanations: she didn’t see you; she was deep in thought; she is grumpy today.
- Example:** “I know I know the material for the exam so the exam doesn’t matter.”

**Reality:** To get a good grade in University you need to be able to show your Professors that you know the material by performing well on tests and assignments.

The skill of reality testing involves a search for evidence to confirm, justify, and support feelings, perceptions and thoughts. Strategies that will help with your reality testing include:

- Be objective.** Try to see a situation from as many angles as possible. When we are quick to make a judgment call on the meaning of a situation we may misread someone’s intentions or internalize meaning that is incorrect.
- Think then react.** Do you tend to give too much emotion or too little emotion to the situations that happen in your life? If so, take a minute to process what amount of emotion is needed for the situation you are presented with.
- Seek other perspectives.** When a situation occurs and you are unsure of what meaning to attribute, ask a trusted friend what their take is on it. Brainstorm all of the potential meanings before you come to a conclusion.



4. **Own the control.** You have control over your own thoughts and reactions to every situation. You can choose not to let the first failed midterm get in the way of you being successful for the remainder of the terms.
5. **Be intentional.** Keep your thought life in check. Be aware of what meaning you are attributing to the situations that arise in your life. Is the meaning realistic? If not, think of an alternative more accurate conclusion.
6. **Visit a success coach.** If you would like more information on this topic visit a success coach. To book an appointment, visit the student success office (2nd floor of south campus hall) or call 519-888-4567 ext. 84410.

## Errors in thinking

Sometimes our way of thinking can influence our level of anxiety and hold us back from making positive behavior changes. Common errors in thinking are listed below. See if any of them are familiar to you and then check out the table of alternative thoughts for suggestions on how to change your thinking.

1. **All or nothing thinking:** Looking at life in absolutes, someone or something is all good or all bad.
2. **Overgeneralization:** Looking at a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3. **Mental filter:** Dwelling on the negatives and ignore the positives.
4. **Discounting positives:** Insisting that accomplishments or positive characteristics don't count.
5. **Mind reading:** Assuming people are reacting negatively to you or assuming why people are reacting in a certain way.
6. **Fortune telling:** Predicting that things will turn out badly, self-sabotaging.
7. **Magnification or minimization:** Blowing things way out of proportion or shrinking their importance.
8. **Emotional reasoning:** Reasoning from how you feel: "I feel stupid, so I must be stupid".
9. **Should statements:** Criticizing yourself or others with "should", and "shouldn't", "must", "ought" and "have to".
10. **Labeling:** Instead of saying: "I made a mistake", you tell yourself: "I am an idiot" or "a loser."
11. **Blame:** Blaming yourself for something you were not entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook the ways that you contributed to the situation.
12. **Comparison:** Comparing yourself to your peers and minimize your achievements if they are not as "impressive" as others'.



Errors in thinking	Alternative/more realistic thought
<b>All or nothing thinking</b>	Things aren't either totally white or totally black – there are shades of grey. Where is this on the spectrum?
<b>Overgeneralization</b>	Am I exaggerating this event and minimizing the evidence? Am I exaggerating the negative and minimizing the positives? How would someone else see it? What's the bigger picture? What evidence is there to say that I have been defeated?
<b>Mental filter</b>	Am I only noticing the bad stuff? Am I filtering out the positives? Am I wearing those "gloomy specs"? What would be more realistic?
<b>Discounting the positives</b>	Am I comparing myself to others? Am I solely focusing on one negative event and not seeing the positive things around me? What would be a more balanced and helpful way of looking at it?
<b>Jumping to conclusions</b> <b>A. Mind reading</b> <b>B. Fortune telling</b>	A. Am I assuming I know what others are thinking? What's the evidence? Those are my own thoughts, not theirs. Is there another, more balanced way of looking at it? B. Am I thinking that I can predict the future? How likely is it that that might really happen?
<b>A. Magnification</b> <b>B. Minimization</b>	A. OK, thinking that the worst possible thing will definitely happen isn't really helpful right now. What's most likely to happen? B. How might this event be significant? What are others' reactions to the event?
<b>Emotional reasoning</b>	Just because it feels bad, doesn't necessary mean it is bad? Or just because I feel this way, does not automatically make it true. My feelings are just a reaction to my thoughts.
<b>Should statements</b>	Am I putting more pressure on myself, setting up expectations of myself that are almost impossible? What would be more realistic?
<b>Labeling</b>	I'm making an evaluation about the situation or person. It's how I make sense of the world, but that doesn't mean my judgments are always right or helpful. Is there another perspective?
<b>Blame</b>	What is my personal responsibility in the recent event? What is not my responsibility? Am I trying to take blame others for my mistakes? Am I taking on others mistakes as my own?
<b>Comparison</b>	What are my goals? Does my success only count if I achieve greater than my peers? Is it possible to always be on top of the curve?



<b>Situation or thought</b>	<b>Errors in thinking</b>	<b>Realistic thoughts</b>	<b>First step solution</b>
I wasted so much time, and the exam is next week. I am going to fail!	Mental Filter Discounting the Positives	I am going to do the best I can do in the time I have available.	Create a study plan of when to focus on each exam.
I can't remember anything three days after I study it.	Fortune Telling All or Nothing Thinking	Maybe I need to look at how I study to become more efficient.	Use an active study strategy such as creating a mind map of each unit of study.
I never do enough. I should do more.	Should Statements All or Nothing Thinking	I may be asking too much of myself. I am working hard and putting in a good effort.	Lessen your task list for each day. You may feel less pressured and end up doing more.
I don't feel like studying. I will wait until I am motivated.	Minimization	I do not have to wait until I am in the mood to get started.	Study for small chunks of time to develop motivation. Take hourly breaks.
I feel overwhelmed with all of the work I need to do. What's the point?	All Or Nothing Thinking	There is a lot of material and no one can remember it all.	Prioritize the material and focus only on one subject at a time.
My friends must think I am stupid for getting this low mark.	Mind Reading	Everyone gets a mark they do not expect at some point. What can I learn from this experience?	Evaluate what areas you can improve. Implement some changes and focus on the tasks ahead.

Fill in your own situations/thoughts in the spaces below.

Situation or thought	Errors in thinking	Realistic thoughts	First step solution

Adapted from - Burns, David. (1999). The Feeling Good Handbook. Toronto, Ontario: Penguin Group.

