Who we are is how we think. Where and how we were raised may determine whether we are pessimists or optimists, conservatives or liberals, atheists or theists, idealists or realists. Our upbringing shapes our fears, which keep us from facing thoughts. It shapes our self-concept, which moves us to defend our thoughts. And it shapes our emotions, which can distort our thinking to an exceptional degree. In this and in other ways our psychological world, shaped by our exposure to cultural and genetic forces, often acts as a barrier to sound thinking. In this chapter we learn about these barriers so that we can diffuse some of their negative influence on our thinking. But this requires that we face ourselves honestly and completely, so that we can discover the personal factors that inhibit our thinking. Unless we face the fact of who we really are, we will not become the sound thinkers we are meant to be.

ENCULTURATION

Imagine for a moment that you have the genetic constitution you have now but were raised by parents in another country. Imagine how you would be different.
Chapter 2  Personal Barriers

If you were raised in India, you would probably be of Hindu faith, worshipping Vishnu and Shiva. Or perhaps you would be of the Jain religion, revering animal life so much that you would never eat meat and would even sweep insects out of your house instead of killing them. If you were raised by parents in Iran, you would probably despise American capitalism. If you were a man in the Sambian tribe of New Guinea, you would likely engage in homosexual behavior until you were married. And if you were a woman in the Mbuti tribe in Africa, you would feel comfortable roaming your community in nothing but a loincloth. Even your taste preference is subject to cultural forces. In America, your favorite pizza topping might be sausage and mushroom, but in Japan it would probably be squid, in England tuna and corn, and in India pickled ginger! In sum, many of the values and preferences you have now, including religious ideas, sexual mores, and work ethic, were instilled in you since birth by your culture. This process, called enculturation, is going on continually, even now, no matter what your age. What does this have to do with thinking? Just this: the extent to which you are able to think critically about ideas that conflict with your basic attitudes and values is inversely related to the extent to which you are enculturated.

Sources of Enculturation

Enculturation has many different sources or influences. One of the major influences is the family in which we grow up. There we learn our religious beliefs, ethical standards, prejudices and stereotypes, eating habits, and worldview. The two great depth psychologists of the twentieth century, for example, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, both accused each other of being negatively influenced by their family background. Jung accused Freud of establishing a negative psychology because he was a Jew, while Freud accused Jung of being blinded by his strong religious background, which prevented him from accepting sexual maladjustment as the root cause of neurosis (Puner, 1947).

Another source of enculturation is our place of work. Here we may learn certain manners of behavior, dress code, professional ethics, and work attitude. The city in which we grow up can also be a strong source of enculturation. Some cities are known for wine and theater, others for beer and brats. Some cities tend to develop men with a lot of machismo, whereas others allow more tolerance for androgyny. In Milwaukee they may prefer Miller Beer, in Denver they may have a strong preference for Coors, and in Munich it may be Lowenbrau. Are the taste buds of citizens in these cities different? Or have the citizens learned to prefer one over the other? And what do you suppose the residents of Detroit think about Japanese automobiles? In the United States we can also find differences in enculturation between northerners and southerners. Southern males, for example, think differently about the use of violence in self-protection and honor (Nisbett and Cohen, 1996). In sum, how we think about masculinity, violence, food and drink, sex, God, and
most other things is often a matter of enculturation. The more we examine these enculturation effects on ourselves, the more we can think more objectively, more independently, more clearly about various matters in the world.

### Some Common American Beliefs

1. *It's okay to kill animals.* The Jains of India consider it sinful to kill even insects.
2. *It's morally wrong to go outside without clothing, no matter where you live.* Women in the Netherlands feel quite comfortable gardening in their back-yard topless. And many tribes in Africa, of course, go without clothing or wear very little of it.
3. *Intentionally deforming the body is sick.* It was once traditional in China to wrap the feet of young girls for years to keep the feet abnormally small. Such abnormality was considered a mark of beauty. And in some tribes in Africa, deforming the lips and ears, making them abnormally large, is also considered a mark of beauty. Perhaps deformation of the body is no longer considered “sick” by most Americans. Consider: In the United States most women, and some men, put holes in their ears; most males have the foreskin of their penis removed; and many thousands of women each year have surgery to enlarge their breasts. Maybe what is considered “sick” is only that deformation which is not done in one’s own culture.
4. *There is only one God.* This monotheism is characteristic of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Most other religions are polytheistic.
5. *Jesus is God.* People of Jewish and Islamic faith would certainly disagree with this.
6. *The Christian Bible is the only holy book.* Of course, virtually every non-Christian would disagree with this. There are many great holy books. The Koran and the Bhagavad-Gita are two examples.
7. *Money is what makes the world go round.* The American obsession with money is catching fire throughout the world, but some cultures put less emphasis on it. Years ago, one Russian emigrant to the United States actually returned to Russia! His reason: we worship money like a god.
8. *Marrying for reasons other than love is immoral.* Throughout history and even today marriages are arranged for practical reasons: to strengthen family ties, for companionship, and for healthy offspring. Love grows later. In fact, people in some countries find our requirement of romantic love for marriage absurd.

### Religion and Enculturation

Intellectually, religious emotions are not creative but conservative. They attach themselves readily to the current view of the world and consecrate it. They steep and dye intellectual fabrics in the seething vat of emotions.

—JOHN DEWEY, *INFLUENCE OF DARWIN ON PHILOSOPHY* (continued)
Religion and Enculturation (continued)

Religion is one area in which it is easy to see the enculturation process and its effects on thinking. For example, most Americans are Christians, primarily because they were raised by Christian parents and not because of any choice they ever made about the matter. Most Christians have not objectively investigated alternative religions or looked extensively into the history of their own religion. Most are unaware, for example, that the stories of Buddha, like the stories of Jesus, portray him as the son of a virgin and that the Buddhist code of ethics is in some ways more strict than that of the Christian ten commandments. And most Christians are probably unaware of the extent to which their own Christian doctrine has been shaped by “mere mortals” over the last seventeen hundred years. Despite our moderate ignorance about our creed and those of others, most of us are certain that the beliefs of our faith are true, and the faith of others and their heroes is false. This we “know” without any investigation at all! Obviously our thoughts about religion are based more on feelings engendered by our faith and our culture than on critical thinking based upon knowledge. Therefore, we can see that resisting enculturation and its blinding influence becomes essential to critical thinking, for it allows people to step back from their conditioning to look at issues more objectively—issues such as abortion, proofs for God’s existence, new roles for women, and so on.

THINKING ACTIVITY 2.1
Our Own Enculturation

Below is an exercise in enculturation. Answer honestly “yes” or “no” to the following questions. The purpose of this exercise is to examine the foundations of some of your thinking, not your conclusions, so don’t be concerned with whether your answer is right or wrong. In some instances there is no general agreement on what the right answer should be.

1. Do you believe that the democratic form of government is the best kind of government in the world?
   a. Are you aware of the problems of democracy often cited by sociologists and people from nondemocratic countries?
   b. Can you express the basic philosophy of alternative forms of government?
   c. Can you cite any positive aspects of either communism or socialism?

(continued)
**THINKING ACTIVITY 2.1 (continued)**

**Our Own Enculturation**

2. Do you believe that abortion is wrong in most or all cases?
   a. Do you have good arguments to support your belief?
   b. Do you know at what moment a human being comes into existence?
   c. Do you know at what moment a developing embryo has human rights?
   d. Do you know at what moment a developing fetus becomes conscious?
   e. Do you know at what moment a developing fetus is capable of experiencing pain?
   f. Can you cite any arguments used by pro-choice advocates to support abortion?
   g. Do you believe that a seed of an apple has the same value as an apple tree?

3. Do you believe that capital punishment is justified for mass murderers?
   a. Do you know that capital punishment is a more expensive way to punish than life imprisonment because of the numerous and very expensive judicial appeals of the former?
   b. Have you seen any statistics that clearly show capital punishment to inhibit murder?

4. Do you believe there is a God?
   a. Have you ever heard of an argument against this idea?
   b. Can you present an argument against this idea?

5. Do you believe that it is moral to use animals for medical experiment to make life better for human beings?
   a. Do you believe that it would be moral for beings on another planet with intelligence superior to ours to use human beings as guinea pigs for the advancement of their alien culture?
   b. Have you ever seen experimental animals suffer in an experimental laboratory?
   c. Do you know that pigs are blowtorched under anesthesia, bunnies have their eyes sewed shut, and monkeys have their heads smashed to study the effects of burn treatment, cosmetics, and concussion, respectively?
   d. Have you ever read any argument against the use of animals in a laboratory?
   e. Can you cite such an argument now?
### THINKING ACTIVITY 2.1 (continued)

#### Our Own Enculturation

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<th>6. Do you believe that ESP is nonsense?</th>
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<td></td>
<td>a. Have you read any studies by parapsychologists?</td>
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<td>b. Do you believe that if we cannot explain something it does not exist?</td>
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<th>7. Do you believe that humans are the most intelligent life forms in the universe?</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Do you know that there are billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars, so that if just one in 10 billion stars has a planet with life, there would be billions of planets with life?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Do you know that human life emerged on this planet in about 4.5 billion years and that the universe is old enough for this evolutionary process to have happened three times in succession?</td>
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<th>8. Do you believe that one racial group is innately superior to another?</th>
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<td>a. Do you know that Japanese score slightly higher on intelligence tests than whites?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Do you know the extent to which the environment determines intelligence?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Do you know the amount of genetic similarity among racial groups?</td>
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<th>9. Do you believe that America is the best country in the world?</th>
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<td>a. Do you know that our infant mortality rate is higher than that of many other modern industrial countries?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Do you know that the United States has one of the highest rates of violent crime in the world?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Do you know that the top 10 percent of the U.S. population hold more than 67 percent of all wealth in the country, including 90 percent of stocks and bonds?</td>
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<th>10. Do you believe that humans did not evolve from lower life forms but were created separately?</th>
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<td></td>
<td>a. Have you ever read a book on the evidence for evolution?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Have you ever talked to a paleontologist, geologist, biochemist, or zoologist about evolution?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Are you aware of any of the following?</td>
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<td>- Homologous structures</td>
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<td>- Vestigial traces</td>
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<td>- Fossil discoveries</td>
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<td>- DNA similarities</td>
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<td>- How our embryonic ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny</td>
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(continued)
THINKING ACTIVITY 2.1 (continued)

Our Own Enculturation

If you answered “yes” to the numbered questions above, but “no” to parts a, b, c, and so on, it could be that you have merely adopted your position through an enculturation process, that is, picked it up through your acquaintance with your peers, parents, religious community, and so on, instead of through careful reflection and the gathering of facts. A “yes” response to many of the questions above might be supported by sound reasoning and facts. The point is not to determine what is true about the issues but to illustrate the lack of both thinking and knowledge that tends to go into these beliefs.

SELF-CONCEPT

It happens over and over again. A company that is doing pretty well in a business it knows will take over another company and ruin it. . . . Why do companies make such big mistakes? One reason, I suggest, is ego. They want to show they are the biggest, smartest kids on the block. . . . When will these guys grow up?

—J. NEASE, "AT & T-NCR COMBO JUST DIDN'T COMPUTE"

Recognizing the extent of our enculturation lessens its effects and moves us closer to an open mind, which is essential to critical and creative thinking. But we must also deal with other barriers that inhibit sound thinking, one of which is self-concept.

Our self-concept is the way we view ourselves. It may be unhealthy if we see ourselves rather negatively as, for example, someone who is not very intelligent or very pretty; or it may be positive and healthy, as when we believe ourselves to be an attractive and worthwhile person. What goes into our idea of ourselves may include not only intelligence and attractiveness but a variety of other things: the sports team we favor, our grades in school, our home, friends, religion, state, country, car, political position, values, possessions, and so on. Thus, someone may view herself as an American, a “card-carrying Republican,” a 49er fan, a conservative Catholic, an animal rights activist, an exceptionally beautiful person, and one who would never buy anything but a Mercedes. People vary in the degree to which they use their attributes, things, values, and affiliations to define themselves and form their self-concept. To some people these elements are central to the notion of self, such that they defend them as though they were defending themselves. Thus, we hear stories of
people assaulting others because of some critical remark against their favorite football team, people killing others over a pair of athletic shoes, and wars between countries because of different religious beliefs. When these contingencies become so central to our notion of who we are, we are not likely to think critically about them. Instead, we respond emotionally and may engage in ego-defense mechanisms, self-serving biases, and other distortions to ensure ourselves that what we identify with, that is, what we think we are, is good.

**THINKING ACTIVITY 2.2**

The Idea of Self

What is our idea of self? Were we born with it? It seems not. Then have we made it our own creation? If so, have we done the right thing in creating it? Does the self truly exist? Or is it only the mind’s idea? Whether our idea of self refers to a real or an illusory self, most will agree that we do spend a lot of time defending, maintaining, and creating that idea of self, as when we fight with others when they demean us, explain away a bad exam grade in order to appear more intelligent, or buy a new car to show off our wealth. According to the Buddhist Walpola Rahula,

> the idea of self ... produces harmful thoughts of “me and mine,” selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities, and problems. It is the source of all troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world. (1974, p. 51)

Do you agree with Rahula’s statement? Is the idea of self this dangerous? Can you cite instances to support it? Can you cite reasons to disagree with this statement?

Pay special attention to the news for the next few days. To what extent can the “troubles in the world” be attributed to the idea of self?

What about troubles in your own personal life? Reflect on your recent arguments or moments of tension with others. To what extent was your thinking affected by your need to protect your self-concept?

Finally, as an exercise in “self,” try to respond to others today and tomorrow without a sense of self, without protecting an ego. How difficult was it? What were the results?
THINKING ACTIVITY 2.3
Letting Go

If your idea of self can get in the way of your thinking, a good strategy to aid straight thinking is to practice letting go of those ideas you have of your self, whether true or false. Letting go means reducing as much as possible your identification with the constituents that you use to define your self. You can begin this letting go by listing the major ideas you have of your self on the lines below.

Activities you most like to do
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

People and things you most enjoy
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Traits you most admire about yourself
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Now imagine that you are fifty years older. Which traits will be gone? Which people and things will have been replaced? Which activities will you no longer be doing? Most likely your idea of self today will not be your idea of self tomorrow, yet you will probably believe that you are the same person (Philosophers debate whether a person is actually the same or not over time). Should we, therefore, identify with those traits, activities, and loves to the point that it leads us to conceit, anger, defensiveness, and an inability to take constructive criticism when those cherished things are threatened? On the other hand, would it be acceptable to believe in something so much that you would die for it? Do you think it would be possible to let go of your idea of self and still act to defend some principle?
EGO DEFENSES

Ego defenses are psychological coping strategies that distort reality in order to protect ourselves from anxiety, guilt, and other bad feelings. Some of the more basic ones that impact on our thinking are denial, projection, and rationalization.

Denial

Experience with an alcoholic population suggests that certain individuals will deny to the point of dying.

—G. FORREST, DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF ALCOHOLISM

When we simply refuse to accept an unpleasant reality, we are using denial. What an unpleasant reality is varies from one person to another. For the alcoholic, it is his or her drinking problem. Thus, because of denial, many alcoholics are unable to think critically about their drinking behavior. Similarly, college students may deny that they are doing poorly in school, that they are lazy, or that their boyfriend or girlfriend really does not love them. By keeping these unpleasant realities from conscious awareness, we protect ourselves from a reality that is unpleasant, but we also inhibit our ability to think objectively about the situation and to make intelligent decisions for our own and others’ best interests.

Projection

There I see the beam in my own eye as a mote in my brother’s eye. It is right there because I am unconscious of the beam in my own eye.

—CARL JUNG, C. G. JUNG SPEAKING

Projection is the defense mechanism by which we see in others a part of ourselves that we cannot accept and do not recognize. We may believe others are hostile toward us when it is we who are hostile toward them. We may see in others our own incompetence and deceitfulness, which we are unable to accept in ourselves. We may see selfish motives in others, which are really the selfish motives in us which we do not consciously recognize. In short, we see others not as they are, but as we are. Our thinking about ourselves and others is therefore grossly distorted when we engage in projection. Like denial, this interferes with our ability to think critically about ourselves, others, and our social situations. Notice in the example below how a man’s perception of others as crazy and his desire to hurt someone seem to be projections of his own inner reality.
Ego Defenses

Rationalization

_The easiest person to deceive is one’s self._

—LORD LYTTON

Of all the defense mechanisms, rationalization is perhaps the greatest inhibitor of clear thinking. Rationalization is distorted thinking that attempts to justify behavior motivated by self-interest or unacceptable drives. It serves to protect us from bad feelings by, for example, turning selfish motives into honorable ones. For example, the captain of the cruise ship _Oceanos_, which sank in the Indian Ocean, was asked why he left his ship in a lifeboat while hundreds of passengers were still on board. He replied that the order to abandon ship applies to everyone, and once the order is given it doesn’t matter when the captain leaves. He also mentioned that he could control rescue operations better from the shore.

In essence, rationalization is lying to ourselves about the real reasons for our behaviors and feelings. It is essential that we believe in this lie for it to protect us; if we knew we were lying, it would do us no good. Many of us can recognize it during tax season:

_I prepare my taxes the way I do because of the way the government spends our money, you know—hundreds of dollars for a plain hammer and thousands of dollars for a toilet seat. It’s our duty as U.S. citizens to put a stop to this nonsense. Maybe if we all held back a little Uncle Sam would get the message._
Self-Serving Biases

Nothing is easier than self-deceit. For what each man wishes, that he also believes to be true.

—DEMOSTHENES

If our motives are good they do not need to be rationalized. But sometimes, in spite of our good motives, undesirable consequences occur, consequences that threaten our self-esteem. The actions of others can also threaten our self-esteem. Such ego-threatening situations can lead us to cognitive biases. These biases in our thinking and perception that serve to protect or elevate our self-esteem are called self-serving biases. As noted above, we do not always think about and perceive things as they are, for that would often mean looking at ourselves in an unpleasant light. Consequently, most people tend to see what they need to see and what they want to see in order to maintain or strengthen positive feelings about themselves (Maslow, 1954).

One aspect of the self-serving bias is the tendency to take credit for our successes and to blame our failures on external factors (Zuckerman, 1979; Bradley, 1978). For example, a student failing an exam might attribute her failure to an unfair test or an incompetent instructor rather than her poor study habits. And when politicians lose elections, they are likely to attribute their loss to negative campaigning by their opponent or a lack of funds necessary to get their message across rather than their own personality flaws or their own flawed political perspective.

Whereas we often attribute our failures to situational factors and our successes to personal ones, a second aspect of the self-serving bias is the tendency to make opposite attributions when judging the behavior of others that threatens our own self-esteem. When a student competitor in college gets a better grade than we do, we may find it threatening to our self-esteem and attribute it to luck or some privileged relationship with the instructor. Yet, when others fail, we may look to their character for an explanation and ascribe their failure to their incompetence, ignorance, or laziness.

The tendency to engage in ego defenses and self-serving biases should decrease as our psychological health increases. As a healthy person we are better able to own up to the totality of who and what we are, both positive and negative (Jung, 1969). When we can truly accept ourselves as we are with our faults, that is, when we can think of ourselves as worthwhile persons in spite of our failings, then we have less need to repress, deny, project, or make misattributions to protect ourselves. As healthier people we are less threatened by the successes of others and more able to tolerate our own failures; we own up to our mistakes and give credit to others. In sum, we think better for being better.
Other Attribution Errors

Our attributions about our own and others’ behaviors are often wrong because they are biased by our need to protect our self-esteem. But they can also go wrong for other reasons. For example, if we saw a young man speeding by in a red convertible with a beautiful lady by his side we would probably attribute his behavior to immaturity and showing off. This is because of a tendency we have to attribute the behavior of others to their personal traits instead of to their situation. Often times our internal attributions are wrong and the situation is the real force behind the behavior. In such instances we have committed the fundamental attribution error. In the example above the student is speeding to the hospital because his gorgeous wife is about to deliver a baby.

The actor-observer bias extends the fundamental attribution error one more step by stating that we tend to make internal attributions when observing the behavior of others but situational attributions when assessing our own behavior (except when examining our success). Thus, employees (observers) may attribute a manager’s strict rules to the manager’s rigid personality, whereas the manager (actor) explains the rules as necessary to deal with the stresses and pressures coming from her superiors. On the other hand, a manager (the observer now) may see her unproductive employees as lazy and unmotivated, whereas they (the actors) perceive their unproductive behavior as a natural consequence of working for an insensitive, authoritarian personality. The differences in attribution are probably rooted in differences in points of view: the actor is less aware of herself and more aware of the employees, while the employees are focused on the boss and are less focused on themselves. Fortunately, this bias can be minimized by having each side empathize with the other (Regan and Totten, 1975).

Think About It: Have you ever made an erroneous attribution for someone else’s behavior? Have you ever been the victim of such an attribution?

Self-Serving Biases?

Self-serving biases are cognitive distortions that put us in a favorable position. The statements below come from the insurance forms of car-accident victims who were asked to summarize the accident. Are these self-serving biases or just grammatical mistakes?

1. A pedestrian hit me and went under my car.
2. As I approached the intersection a sign suddenly appeared in a place where no sign had ever appeared before.

(continued)
THINKING ACTIVITY 2.4

Owning Up to Our Dark Side

We have seen how a failure to see and accept ourselves as we are can lead to thinking distortions as we rationalize, project, deny, and use self-serving biases. Therefore, it is worthwhile to look at the dark side of ourselves and accept it as part of who we are. So as not to walk away from such an exercise depressed and full of loathing about ourselves, it is important to write down our positive characteristics as well. At home in a private place, write down ten positive characteristics of your personality. Then, be honest with yourself and write down some of your less-positive characteristics that you have not really looked at before. To help you identify those dark elements, which the psychologist Carl Jung called the “shadow,” reflect back on how you have reacted to criticism from others in the past and consider these statements by one of Jung’s students, M.-L. von Franz:

If you feel an overwhelming rage coming up in you when a friend reproaches you about a fault, you can be fairly sure that at this point you will find a part of your shadow, of which you are unconscious.

It is particularly in contacts with people of the same sex that one stumbles over both one’s own shadow and those of other people.

When an individual makes an attempt to see his shadow, he becomes aware of (and often ashamed of) those qualities and impulses he denies in himself but can plainly see in other people—such things as egotism, mental laziness, and sloppiness; unreal fantasies, schemes, and plots; carelessness and cowardice; inordinate love of money and possessions—in short, all the little sins about which he might previously have told himself: “That doesn’t matter; nobody will notice it, and in any case other people do it too.” (Jung, 1964, pp. 168–69)
THE ROLE OF EXPECTATIONS AND SCHEMATA

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868–1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. “It is overfull. No more will go in!”

“Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”

—N. SENZAKI AND P. REPS, “ZEN STORIES"

Not only do we tend to think about the world according to what we want to see and what we need to see, we tend to think of it in terms of what we expect to see. We tend to perceive and think about others and situations in terms of the ideas we have already formed about them. These ideas are called schema. Often we distort the truth to make it fit into our existing schema, or we notice only those aspects of others’ behavior or ideas which fit into our existing ideas about them. In other words, human beings are reluctant to change their perceptions and ideas to accommodate the facts (accommodation); instead, it is easier to fit our observations and thinking into our existing schemata (assimilation). If our prior experience with someone is that he is extremely selfish and we form an idea of him as “a selfish person,” then we tend to see his actions as selfish. If he suggests a new policy at work to increase morale and productivity, we wonder about the selfish motives that must be underlying his new policy. Surely he cannot be interested in the well-being of others and the company’s productivity.

Similarly, if a teacher believes that a student is not very bright, frequent questions from that student may be interpreted by the teacher as verification of the student’s ignorance. On the other hand, if the teacher is told that a student is intelligent and highly motivated, the student’s questions may be seen as reflecting that person’s insight and motivation. Imagine what your reaction would be if you heard that a dictator was freeing some political prisoners and giving millions of dollars to the poor in his country. You would probably either discount the information as mere propaganda or question his motives, believing that he was trying to manipulate his people for some reason. His behavior would not likely cause you to change your perception of him from a ruthless dictator to a compassionate benefactor.

A good example of a schema that influences the way we perceive and think is the stereotype. Stereotypes are simplistic, biased views about members of a certain group. We learn stereotypes from a variety of sources. Sometimes we overgeneralize from our limited experience with members of a group. Often we learn our parents’ stereotypes by listening and observing them, and we sometimes absorb stereotypes from our peers and the media. Whatever their source, stereotypes have a powerful effect on our thinking.
It is important to realize that stereotypes are inaccurate. They assume that groups are more homogeneous than they are. For some reason when it comes to our group we see the richness and diversity of its members, but when it comes to our perception of other groups, we assume that their members are all alike. On what basis can we possibly assume so? Certainly, similarities exist among group members but not to the degree that stereotypes imply.

**Think About It:** An open mind is essential to critical thinking. But there is no easy recipe for acquiring an open mind, especially regarding prejudice. Negative thoughts toward a minority group may go, but negative feelings often linger on. Those feelings may lead us to continuing negative behaviors and attitudes toward a group.

Although stereotypes in particular, and schemata in general, often distort our thinking, sometimes we do change our views of people and situations when we experience facts contradicting our schema. Some research suggests that this accommodation is most likely to occur when the new information is moderately discrepant with our schemata (Bochner and Insko, 1966). If an idea is very similar to our existing views, we are likely to minimize the difference and assimilate it into our existing schema, thus not modifying our views. Likewise, if the information is highly discrepant, it simply cannot fit into our schema and we reject it. For example, if typical Christians were exposed to arguments that Jesus never existed and that the entire New Testament is a myth, they would find this information very discrepant and would probably reject it without the least consideration. On the other hand, information that Jesus was unusually friendly with a political group whose intent was to overthrow the Romans might simply be assimilated into their schema of Jesus as a spiritual leader, who just happened to appeal to some political groups bent on overthrowing Roman rulers. Little or no change would be made in their concept of Jesus.

Moderately discrepant information, however, is too different to be easily assimilated and yet not so different that it must be rejected. Thus, if we are likely to change our views in the face of evidence, moderately discrepant information will most likely, but not necessarily, lead to that change. Can you imagine any real or fictitious revelation about Jesus that could be considered by most Christians as moderately discrepant with their views?
EMOTIONAL INFLUENCES

Emotions are an important mark of human experience. They are in part what separates humans from machines and the lower animals, for machines can compute but they can not experience joy. And animals may find themselves attached to others, but they do not love them. Emotions give our world taste and richness, joy and surprise, but also pain and sorrow. Emotions can affect and inspire thought, said William James, but he also said they can destroy it. Later in this book we look at how emotions can give birth to thinking, but for now our attention focuses on their inhibiting influence, on their capacity to bury, twist, and fragment the thinking process and take it to the depths of the irrational.

Anger

Why does my violence so silence reason and intelligence?

—JEAN RACINE, PHAEDRA

Both Plato and Aristotle believed that anger could be a “potentially constructive ally of reason” (Averill, 1982, p. 85), but both of them also recognized its destructive influences on rational thought. Some philosophers, like Seneca, considered it wholly without value:

Seneca sees absolutely no value in anger. . . . No provocation justifies it, no situation permits it, and no benefit is gained by it. Once allowed, anger entirely consumes its possessor and renders dull his capacity for reasoning and sensible action. (Averill, 1982, p. 83)

Certainly anger and reason appear to most people to be the antithesis of each other; where one appears, the other seems to be absent. Anger has destroyed intimacy, thwarted good judgment, motivated senseless killings, inspired numerous wars, and probably burned more bridges in the career paths of men and women than any other single force. It also distorts our perception of a situation, colors our ability to think critically about it, and impairs our self-control.

The cause of anger may be a threat to something we hold dear. It may also be due to frustration, which is often caused by the blocking of a goal, or even by stress and hormonal changes in our bodies. No matter what the source, it is important not to make important decisions in the heat of anger, for good thinking does not prevail during such moments. Instead, we want to release the tension caused by the anger and strike out, hurt, or destroy.

The short-term goal of releasing tension can supersede and crush years of careful deliberation and planning as we say or do things we know we should not. The aspiring businesswoman ruins her career by berating her boss for making a poor
decision, or a man angry at his fiancée’s selfish behavior castigates her for all her personal faults and breaks off the engagement. Although anger may inspire great speeches, it often throws thinking in the backseat as our emotions take control.

Earlier we mentioned how previous knowledge, like stereotypes and other schemata, can distort our thinking. Feelings can also affect thinking in a similar way. For example, anger can not only overrule our thinking, but it can distort it so that we believe that what we are doing is justified and rational. For example, a parent may spank a child because of the parent’s frustration with the child and need to release anger. The parent may then rationalize the aggression against the child by claiming that such punishment was necessary to teach the child appropriate behavior—in spite of the fact that psychologists have for years been saying that appropriate behavior can be taught by nonviolent methods and that such spanking can be harmful to the child. The parent does not acknowledge the real motivation for the behavior.

Dealing with Anger

If anger can lead to unthinking behavior or override our better judgment, we need to lessen its impact. We offer five suggestions.

First, do not vent your anger:

The psychological rationales for ventilating anger do not stand up under experimental scrutiny. The weight of the evidence indicates precisely the opposite: expressing anger makes you angrier, solidifies an angry attitude, and establishes a hostile habit. If you keep quiet about momentary irritations and distract yourself with pleasant activity until your fury simmers down, chances are you will feel better, and feel better faster, than if you let yourself go in a shouting match. (Tavris, 1982, pp. 143–44)

Besides fueling the original anger, ventilating anger more often results in guilt, lowered self-esteem, mild depression, anxiety, embarrassment, and an exacerbation of the original conflict (Tavris, 1982; Averill, 1982). This is not to say that one should stew for days with unabated anger. If the anger does not eventually subside, although usually it does, an attempt should be made to calmly talk about the matter. Pick a time when the other person is not angry and will therefore be more likely to listen.

Second, get advice about your chosen course of action from others who are not angry. They may be able to give you a clearer perspective and prevent the sometimes disastrous consequences of decisions made under the influence of anger.

Third, become assertive. Anger is sometimes caused by continuous victimization. Being assertive means standing up for your rights in a nonaggressive manner that diminishes the potential for defensiveness in the other person. Unlike with anger, when one is assertive, one has self-control. Bear in mind, however, that it is irrational to believe that life should always treat us justly. In other words, don’t overdo it.
Fourth, *learn to relax* and to practice other stress-management strategies. Reducing the stress in our lives and practicing relaxation exercises regularly can help us control the frequency of our anger.

Lastly, *don’t get angry*. This may sound simplistic; however, when we consider that anger is rooted in the meaning we give to the events around us, as opposed to the events themselves, it is reasonable to try to alter that initial perception and prevent the anger from occurring altogether. Psychologists call this *cognitive restructuring* or *reappraisal*. For example, if we perceive that someone is trying to slight us in some way, we might ask ourselves if there is another reason for his behavior. It might be possible, for example, that he is unaware of the impact his behavior has on us. Empathy, identifying with the position of the other person, sometimes helps us to make these reappraisals. Or we might want to put things in proper perspective. For example, if we were counting on someone to mow the lawn for us today and he did not, we can ask ourselves how important it is that the lawn be mowed today as opposed to tomorrow.

**Think About It:** Aristotle said, “But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way—this is not easy” (*Nichomachean Ethics*). This statement suggests that there is a place for anger. Even Jesus got angry: “And making a kind of whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, also the sheep and oxen, and he poured out the money of the changers and overturned the tables” (John 2:15). In what situations, if any, do you think anger is an appropriate response? What would be the right way to express it? Be careful that you do not rationalize your past behavior.

**Passion**

*Be it what it will, the ruling passion conquers reason still.*

—ALEXANDER POPE, *MORAL ESSAYS*

William Penn defined passion as “a sort of fever in the mind, which ever leaves us weaker than it found us” (1906, p. 57). We define it more prosaically as the intense love of some person, thing, situation, or value. Most people have experienced it in romantic love, whence the statement “Love is blind.” In love or wherever it is found, passion is able to unseat reason, and rational thought becomes “rationalized thought.”
Chapter 2  Personal Barriers

How many women regretably become pregnant because they surrender to “the heat of passion”? How many lives have been lost to the passion for the high of drugs, and how many good relationships to passion felt for someone else? When we love a person or thing, we do not see the dark side; we tend only to justify our desires. Romantic lovers, for example, idealize their partners and often find them without faults. Contrary opinions from friends and family are seen as motivated by jealousy or born of misunderstanding.

Our passion may be our religion, our food, or our drugs. It may be sports, the television, a person, a home, or a material object. Whatever the source, we tend to immerse ourselves in our object of passion, revel briefly in its taste, and only later, if ever, find our reason again.

Depression

When our object of passion is lost, we may find ourselves dysphoric or seriously depressed. This response is echoed in the story of Romeo and Juliet and the numerous young and old alike every year who commit suicide out of a deep sense of loss. But the loss of something dear to us is only one cause of depression. Other causes include biochemical factors, severe stress, a sense of hopelessness, lack of sunlight, and illogical thinking.

Of particular interest to us are the effects that depression may have on thinking. Several studies on depression support the idea that irrational cognitions are correlated with depression. (For our purposes “irrational” and “illogical” are the same, although some make a distinction here.) However, some disagreement exists about whether unhealthy cognitions cause depression, or whether depression causes unhealthy cognitive styles. Research supports both hypotheses. The conclusion from a longitudinal study on this topic, using a sample of 998 people, is that “people change their expectancies and subscribe to irrational beliefs as a result of being depressed,” and not the other way around (Lewinsohn et al., 1981). Other studies (e.g., Miranda and Persons, 1988) also give support to the idea that mood can influence thinking.

The kinds of irrational thinking that often accompany depression include a tendency to see or exaggerate the negative side of a situation and to diminish the positive:

A depressed patient observed that a faucet was leaking in a bathroom, that the pilot light was out in the stove, and that one of the steps in the staircase was broken. He concluded, “The whole house is deteriorating.” The house was in excellent condition (except for these minor problems); he had made a massive overgeneralization. (Beck, 1976, p. 219)
To depressed people the cup is half empty, not half full. Depressed people also tend to minimize their successes and maximize their failures by attributing their successes to external causes and their failures to internal causes. In general, depressives are more critical of themselves than they should be and see the world and their future in a more negative light than nondepressives do. That is why suicide prevention centers must often help suicidal people think of alternatives to their problems. Their ability to see their situations clearly is often impaired by their negative mood. As Schneidman (1985) points out, suicidal people, most of whom are depressed, may see only two alternatives to their dilemma: suicide or some unrealistic solution.

Depression in various degrees is so prevalent that it is often called the common cold of mental illness. Ten percent of college students, for example, exhibit moderate depression (Craighead, 1984). We have a much greater chance of experiencing mild depression some time in our lives, and even mild depression can negatively color our thinking.

**Dealing with Depression**

Serious depression requires serious psychological or medical intervention by a professional. But if we are suffering from “the blues,” we must realize that our thinking about ourselves and about life in general is probably colored somewhat by our negative mood. If possible, we should put off major decisions until our mood lifts or talk to others to help us explore alternative courses of action and achieve better insight into our situation. If we have not already done so, we should exercise, for studies show that exercise can lessen depression (Stein and Motta, 1992). In the meantime, we can try to identify the causes of our depression and take action to correct them or, if necessary, seek advice on handling those causes.

Sometimes the cause of our depression is our own irrational thinking. For example, if we encounter a person who does not like us we may become extremely upset about it and spend much of our waking hours wondering what it is about us that is difficult to like. We may also strive excessively to please that person, and we might even suffer insomnia worrying about it. Through our own reflection or through the help of others we may come to see the irrational assumption underlying our unhealthy reaction: “Everyone should like me because I’m a nice person.” If we think carefully about this assumption for a moment we can see there is no truth to this, for plenty of nice people, including Jesus, Ghandi, and Mother Teresa had enemies. No matter how nice we may be, some people will invariably misunderstand us or project on us their own inadequacies. Similarly, students who feel lowered self-worth when they receive a
disappointing grade are operating under a different irrational belief: “My worth depends upon my achievements.” They need only remind themselves that many psychopaths have done well on college exams to realize the error in this kind of thinking.

Cognitive psychologists help people with dysfunctional thinking to see the irrational nature of their thoughts and then suggest rational replacements. Our friends and colleagues may help us do the same, and we can even learn to do this ourselves. In the paragraph below we can see how one cognitive psychologist challenged the distorted thinking of a student who was fearful of giving a speech (sound familiar?).

**PATIENT:** I have to give a talk before my class tomorrow and I’m scared stiff.

**THERAPIST:** What are you afraid of?

**PATIENT:** I think I’ll make a fool of myself.

**THERAPIST:** Suppose you do . . . make a fool of yourself. Why is that so bad?

**PATIENT:** I’ll never live it down.

**THERAPIST:** “Never” is a long time. . . . Now look here, suppose they ridicule you. Can you die from it?

**PATIENT:** Of course not.

**THERAPIST:** Suppose they decide you’re the worst public speaker that ever lived. . . . Will this ruin your future career?

**PATIENT:** No. . . . But it would be nice if I could be a good speaker.

**THERAPIST:** Sure it would be nice. But if you flubbed it, would your parents or your wife disown you?

**PATIENT:** No. . . . They’re very sympathetic.

**THERAPIST:** Well, what would be so awful about it?

**PATIENT:** I would feel pretty bad.

**THERAPIST:** For how long?

**PATIENT:** For about a day or two.

**THERAPIST:** And then what?

**PATIENT:** Then I’d be O.K. (Beck, 1976, p. 250)

The resolution of depression is not always easy. Fortunately, most people do not become severely depressed. And most who are mildly to moderately depressed, unless it is a major personality characteristic, will find their depression eventually lifting. In the meantime, we must be careful about the thoughts and decisions we make while depressed and remind ourselves of the cognitive distortions we may be experiencing.
THINKING ACTIVITY 2.5
Five Thinking Errors

The five thinking errors below range in severity and frequency and can be found in all of us from time to time. They are particularly likely to appear in times of emotional strain. As you read them, think about instances in which these thinking errors have distorted your thinking, and how these errors have affected your significant others.

1. **Personalization.** Egocentric thinking, in which the world is seen to revolve unduly around the individual. A person might take responsibility for a disappointing picnic at the lake by saying, “I should have known it would probably rain today; it rains a lot in May. I should have waited until June.” Or walking by a woman in a store with an angry look on her face, a person wonders, “Why is she mad at me? What did I do?”

2. **Polarized Thinking.** Also called “black and white thinking” or “dichotomous thinking” (later we examine it as the “either/or fallacy”). For example, in depression, a person may see himself only in a negative light and fail to see the good characteristics he has. Or if a person is not extremely successful, she might consider herself a loser. A man might say, “People either like me, or they hate me,” not realizing that people can also have mixed feelings about him. A person with a borderline personality disorder often sees people as either all good or all bad.

3. **Overgeneralization.** Drawing broad conclusions on the basis of a single incident. A student fails one course at college and then believes she is a failure and will not be able to earn her degree. Or after receiving a reprimand duly or unduly deserved, a person thinks, “Everyone hates me.” Or after his girlfriend breaks up with him, a man thinks, “I’m never going to find someone who will love me.”

4. **Catastrophizing.** A common characteristic of anxious people in which they consider the worst possible outcome of an event. A young man announces to his mother that he is getting married, and she immediately thinks about the likelihood of a deformed baby or even a divorce in his future. A young woman going out on a blind date expects it to be a real disappointment. Or a father, upon hearing that his son intends to major in philosophy, imagines his son permanently unemployed and expects him to be a constant financial burden.

5. **Selective Abstraction.** Focusing on one detail of a situation and ignoring the larger picture. For example, an instructor receives a very favorable evaluation from 90 percent of her students but dwells instead on the unfavorable comments from the few. Or a football player, after an overall excellent performance, curses himself for the one pass that he should have caught. (Beck, 1976)
STRIVING FOR COGNITIVE CONSISTENCY

Cognitive consistency refers to a harmony among our various thoughts, and to a harmony between our thoughts and behaviors. Human beings strive for cognitive consistency, because holding onto thoughts that are inconsistent can create an unpleasant state called cognitive dissonance (discord) when the inconsistency cannot be justified. This state of dissonance may lead to psychological tension and uncomfortable feelings. When we find ourselves in a state of cognitive dissonance we will often try to change our thoughts or our behaviors to achieve harmony and thereby reduce the tension.

Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) conducted a now classic study illustrating the effects of cognitive dissonance. They had subjects perform a boring task and then asked them to lie to the next subjects by telling them that the task was actually quite enjoyable. Some of the subjects were paid $1 to lie, whereas others were paid $20. Later the subjects were asked about their feelings toward the task. Results showed that subjects who lied for $1 rated the task more favorable than the ones who lied for $20 (about $75 in today’s money). This was exactly what Festinger and Carlsmith’s cognitive dissonance theory would have predicted. The group that lied for $20 could more easily justify the inconsistency between their thoughts and their behavior. They might have said to themselves something like this:

The task was really boring, but I told this other guy that it was a lot of fun. I know I lied, but, hey, wouldn’t you for twenty bucks? I mean, it’s not like I hurt anyone, you know.

On the other hand, the group that lied for $1 would experience dissonance and pressure to change their belief, because it is not easy to justify the inconsistency for only $1:

The task was really boring, but I told this other guy that it was a lot of fun. I lied for a lousy buck. Boy do I sell out cheap—a lousy buck. But, hey, when I thought about it, you know, it really wasn’t so bad. In fact it was sort of challenging. I mean, turning pegs in a hole a quarter of a turn over and over again for a half-hour. Hey, that’s a challenge! Kind of fun. No, I didn’t lie to the guy, it was quite challenging and enjoyable actually. Besides, I wouldn’t lie for a buck.

Thus we see how our thinking can be influenced by dissonance and the need to reduce tension. Specifically, cognitive dissonance can lead to rationalization, a defense mechanism mentioned above.

The need for cognitive consistency shows up in many areas of life. When buying a car, for example, we might have to decide between two attractive models. If we don’t believe in spending a lot of money for a car or paying for a lot of
unnecessary frills but we are somehow talked into doing so, we experience dissonance as our behavior becomes incompatible with our beliefs. We then have two options to remove the dissonance: (1) we can change our behavior—in this case, that would mean taking the car back, which is not usually an option—or (2) we can change our thinking about the car, in other words, rationalize our purchase:

Compared to the cheaper car I was looking at, this one will last longer, so I'll easily get the extra money out of it. Besides, this car is safer than the other one. And when it comes to your very life, you can never spend too much. As far as the accessories go, well, they'll help to sell the car when that distant day arrives. Besides, what's wrong with a little pleasure in life. You only live once, you know.

Incongruence among thoughts or between thoughts and behaviors does not always cause a dissonant state. For example, if a student disliked the school she was attending but no other school in her area was affordable, there would be no cognitive dissonance. As long as there is sufficient justification for the discrepant situation, cognitive dissonance does not occur. Here's one more example: If a young man does not believe in premarital sex, but when the moment arrives at which his beliefs must be put to the test he engages in such sex, then cognitive dissonance would probably occur—unless he can sufficiently justify the discrepancy somehow, such as believing he was not free to choose. He might argue to himself that he was drinking that night and didn't know what he was doing. If this argument is convincing, no dissonance will occur and he will not be motivated to change his thinking about premarital sex. If, however, he cannot find a source of coercion or justifiable motivation for his behavior, he will probably experience dissonance and be motivated to either (1) change his thinking about the wrongfulness of premarital sex or (2) change his behavior. Because he cannot undo the sexual behavior that caused the dissonance, his only option is to change his attitude, or live with the dissonance.

We can apply the idea of cognitive consistency to relationships in other ways. Balance theory argues that our likes and dislikes of other people should be in harmony. For example, if you like Mary and you both are pro-life, then you have a balanced relationship; there is no disharmony. However, if you like Mary and she is pro-life but you are pro-choice, you have some incongruence, an imbalance that creates pressure on you to change either your attitude toward abortion or your thinking and feelings toward Mary.

Balance theory predicts that many people would vote for a candidate because their friend or spouse did. Doing so would create a more balanced situation. When the imbalance grows too strong, some couples won't even talk about politics or religion, although many couples and friends do openly disagree with each other and maintain their deep friendship at the same time. Crucial or cherished ideas create more balance pressure than rather irrelevant ones. Who cares, for example, what your friend's favorite ice cream is? Relationships do not
change over a disagreement about vanilla or chocolate. However, dissonance would likely occur in a relationship when both persons are quite politically active and share very different political ideas.

Many couples and their mutual friends experience an unbalanced relationship when the couple gets divorced. For example, it is often difficult for an ex-wife to continue her friendship with someone who actually likes her ex-husband. Similarly, it is difficult for the mutual friend to continue her affection for both friends when each criticizes the other in her presence. In order to eliminate her dissonance, she may begin thinking and feeling negatively about one or the other and break off her relationship with that person, or she may find a way to get them together again.

Thus we can see how dissonance and imbalanced situations can change our sexual mores, political views, and attitudes toward our friends, for no other reason than to remove the incongruence and tension we experience. Our need for compatible thoughts and behaviors actually leads to altered thinking.

**STRESS**

> It's when I'm weary of considerations,
> And life is too much like a pathless wood
> 
> I'd like to get away from earth awhile
> —ROBERT FROST, "BIRCHES"

Stress is excessive demand upon the body or mind, producing physical or psychological strain. The sources of stress are numerous: work overload, rapid cultural change, time pressure, conflict, noise pollution, negative life experiences, and daily hassles. These stressors not only contribute to between 50 and 80 percent of all diseases, but they affect our cognition as well. Stress can impair our memory, the basis of much of our thinking, and it can also affect thinking more directly. Stress can lead to preoccupation with an idea, concentration difficulties, deterioration in judgment and logical thinking, and negative self-evaluations. It may also lead to an inability to check our thoughts against reality (Beck et al., 1979) and may seriously interfere with our ability to make decisions (Janis, 1982). Under stress our ability to perceive alternative solutions to a problem diminishes, our capacity to search for information is impaired, and the long-term consequences of our decisions are overlooked. This leads us to make decisions prematurely—an action called “premature closure” (Janis, 1982)—and then creates more stress as we deal with the consequences of our poor decisions.
A professor was asked to speak to a community group. He walked to the wrong room and suddenly realized that the presentation was to be given in another building. Beginning to feel pressure, he trotted out to the parking lot to drive to the other building, which was about a block away. He reached for his car keys and found none. Panic began to build. He could see the building in which he was to speak but could not get into his car to drive over there. It was already five minutes past the time of his talk, so he ran to his office to pick up his keys and then ran back and drove over. Only then did he realize that he could have walked the distance in less time than it took him to go back to his office for his keys.

This is a classic example of how stress interferes with our ability to perceive alternatives.

Because stress affects our thinking in so many ways, it is important that we keep it under control. A number of stress-management strategies can help us with this control. However before we can apply them we must first be aware that we are under stress. This is not always easy for stress can accumulate so insidiously that we underestimate its extent. We may get clues, however, by observing ourselves and noting the signs and symptoms of stress and by listening to what our friends and loved ones say about us, such as, “What’s wrong with you lately? You’re not yourself.”

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**Signs and Symptoms of Stress**

The following signs and symptoms may be indicative of stress. The list is by no means exhaustive. The more of these symptoms you have, the more stress you are likely to be suffering, although no two people respond to stress in exactly the same way. Bear in mind that although stress is a common cause of these ailments, other causes may be responsible.

**Cognitive Signs**

1. Poor concentration
2. Poor memory
3. Paranoid thinking
4. Low self-esteem, loss of self-confidence
5. Nightmarish dreams
6. Preoccupation with one idea or thought
7. Constant worrying

**Emotional Signs**

1. Depression
2. Moodiness
3. Irritability
4. Anger
5. Crying spells

(continued)
Chapter 2  Personal Barriers

Signs and Symptoms of Stress (continued)

Physical Signs

1. Gastrointestinal problems
2. Inability to feel relaxed
3. Insomnia
4. Fatigue
5. Loss of appetite
6. Ulcers
7. Skin rashes
8. More frequent colds
9. Headaches
10. Worsening of other physical problems
11. Loss of sex drive

Behavioral Signs

1. Withdrawal from others
2. Intolerance of others
3. Displaced aggression toward others
4. Fidgeting behavior (pencil tapping, leg bouncing)
5. Increase in bad habits (fingernail biting, smoking)
6. Increase in facial and other tics
7. Binge eating
8. Increased use of alcohol

Stress Management

Once we know we are under stress, it is important to identify the stressors, or causes of stress, being as specific as possible. Don’t settle for generalities like “life stresses me out.” That’s too vague to suggest a stress-management solution—suicide is not a viable option. By probing further we may find that it is not life itself that is the source of our stress; it’s the speech we have to give in two weeks that is causing us strain. Or perhaps it’s our children. But what about our children? Are they too noisy? Too demanding? Too disobedient? Do they require too much attention or get us up in the middle of the night? We need to be specific, for each situation requires a different approach to management.

In general, stress-management approaches fall into three categories: (1) removing the outside source of stress, (2) removing the inside source of stress, and (3) managing the body’s response to stress. Removing the outside source of stress would be appropriate when dealing with the stress of noisy children, for example. We could set an hour of quiet time every day, remove some noisy toys from the house,
establish stricter rules about playing outside, or install more doors and carpet. If the stress comes from the constant attention we must give a child in the middle of the night, the solution may be to ask one’s spouse to share in that responsibility by alternating nights. Again, the source of stress should be identified as specifically as possible. Often the appropriate stress-management approach then becomes obvious.

If the outside source of stress cannot be removed, perhaps we can remove the inside source, which involves changing ourselves. Typically this means removing irrational ideas and expectations that give rise to our stress, and changing the meaning we give to the stressor. Often we can change the stressful meaning we give to life events by putting them in proper perspective. If we must give a speech, for example, we could ask ourselves, “What’s the worst that can realistically happen? Will I die?” Probably the worst would be to forget our speech and become embarrassed. Life goes on. In one week no one will remember anyway, because people will be too busy with their own problems.

Putting a speech in proper perspective is one way to reduce its stress. Often times this requires addressing and removing irrational ideas that underlie the speech anxiety. For example, we may be overly concerned about our upcoming speech because we believe that we must be perfect in everything we do, that everyone should like us, or that everyone is concerned about how we perform. All of these are irrational thoughts that must be challenged and replaced with more realistic ones.

Sometimes we can extend our perspective still wider to show how small our stressors really are. If we stop to think about how short our lives are and how small we are in this huge universe, certain concerns and worries dissolve away in insignificance. When we remember that we are in a galaxy with billions of stars and that there may be more galaxies than there are grains of sand on all the beaches on this planet, and when we think about how old the universe is (about 15 billion years), and how in comparison our life is shorter than that of a fruit fly, then maybe it doesn’t matter any more that we are trapped behind a car going 34 miles an hour in a 35-mph zone, that our spouse rarely gets the garbage out on time, or that our hair won’t lie down just right.

Life is too short to waste
In critic peep or cynic bark,
Quarrel or reprimand;
’Twill soon be dark;
Up! mind thine own aim, and
God speed the mark!

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “TO J. W.”

If we cannot eliminate the source of stress and we cannot change the meaning we give to it, we can always manage our body’s response to stress through exercise, meditation, relaxation techniques, adequate rest, and proper nutrition.
This reduces both the subjective feelings of stress and the deleterious effects stress can have on our physical and mental functioning. Exercise, meditation, or relaxation alone can sometimes be enough to remove the feelings of stress. Proper nutrition is important because stress rapidly removes essential vitamins, particularly the B complex, which are vital to healthy physical and mental functioning.

**SUMMARY**

The extent to which we can think critically is strongly related to who we are. The enculturation process largely determines our prejudices and values, and our self-concept contains specific areas of sensitivity and weaknesses that motivate defensive thinking through the use of ego defenses and self-serving biases. Additionally, our schemata shape, restrict, and stereotype our perceptions and thinking. And depression, anger, passion, and stress can lead to negative, irrational thoughts and poor judgment. Our thinking also seems to be affected by our need for consistency and balance among our thoughts and emotions.

All of these factors lead one to wonder about the extent to which human beings can be rational at all. Certainly, the more we engage in self-reflection and become aware of these biases and limitations, the more we are able to avoid them. Such awareness can help us identify our thinking biases and move our thinking in a healthier, more rational direction. Besides self-reflection, we can take specific actions to remove the causes of bad thinking. But transcending our personal barriers is not easy, and most of us do not completely remove them. Fortunately, better thinking does not require perfection, only one step at a time in the right direction.

**BARRIER CHALLENGES**

1. List the favorite beer in your town or among your group. Is it your favorite as well? Why?
2. Would you eat cow? Would people in India eat cow? Do you think it’s okay to eat dog? Do you know any cultures in which they do eat dog?
3. What does your religion teach you about the right way to think about contemporary issues such as abortion, the existence of God, euthanasia, working hard, and the role of women? In what other ways does your religion shape your values, beliefs, and attitudes?
4. How has your hometown influenced you? To help you find out, write down how you might be different if you had been raised in the following cities: San Francisco, Des Moines, New York, Detroit, Cheyenne.
5. Investigate a major religion that is unfamiliar to you. How might people of that religion view your religious beliefs?
6. How have your friends and school influenced your values?
7. Is there anything unique about the people who live in your state compared with people in other states?

8. Sometimes the people we hate most are those who have the trait we hate most in ourselves. Whom do you hate most? Why? Could that trait characterize you as well? If in doubt, ask others.

9. When was the last time you rationalized? It’s easier to look back and see it than to identify it at the time it is happening.

10. When was the last time you failed a test or a task at work? Did you use a self-serving bias to protect your self-esteem?

11. We often see according to our expectations and beliefs. Is your perception of your instructor influenced by what you heard about him or her before? Do significant people in your life complain that you fail to recognize their changed behavior and still perceive them as they used to be?

12. When you are angry, do you typically say things that you don’t really mean? Do you tend to overgeneralize or catastrophize?

13. Alexander Hamilton once said, “Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice, without constraint” (The Federalist). Do you agree with his statement? What would people’s behavior be like without a government? Can you find instances in history to support your answer?

14. When you are depressed, which of Beck’s five thinking errors (see page 35) tends to characterize your thinking?

15. Have you ever experienced pressure to abandon a couple who broke up? Did you maintain allegiance to one and not the other? How have you and others you know handled such situations?

16. Did you ever believe one way but act in another? How did you handle the apparent contradiction?

17. What happens to your thinking under stress?

18. Some people define themselves by their possessions, religious beliefs, or abilities. How do you define yourself? These are the topics about which you may have difficulty thinking objectively.

19. What stereotypes do you tend to believe? Do you know people who do not fit these stereotypes? If you can’t find exceptions, ask your friends, family members, or college professors. You could also do research on these groups that you stereotype to learn about the diversity within those groups.

20. Recall two or three times when you were angry. Which was worse: the situation that caused your anger or the consequences of venting your anger? Could you have done anything to control your anger?

21. Has passion ever clouded your reason?