



# Thinking Traps:

## How to Help Residents Escape

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# What You'll Learn

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The brain controls many aspects of thinking. And as people age, certain parts of the brain shrink, particularly those crucial to complex mental activities. This can affect seniors' ability to plan, organize and make decisions – and more. In fact, a common experience among seniors are what's known as “thinking traps,” or patterns of thought that distort how they see situations, which can lead to unproductive emotions or actions. Since effective problem-solving is essential to helping residents effectively handle issues that may arise, learn the steps your organization can take to help seniors break free of thinking traps and fuel positive thinking for a healthy living environment.





# Types of Thinking Traps

*Many types of thinking traps exist that seniors can fall into and lead to discontent among residents. Some of these negative thought patterns include:*

- 1. All-or-nothing Thinking:** This is also sometimes referred to as black and white thinking. In these cases, individuals feel that only extremely good or extremely bad outcomes are possible.
- 2. Catastrophizing:** Some people only imagine the worst-case scenario, even if such an outcome is not realistic.
- 3. Personalizing:** Others seniors get stuck in thinking traps in which they believe that if something goes wrong, it is their fault.
- 4. Mind Reading:** It is common for people to think that they know what others are thinking of them, and assume it is negative, even though there is no basis in fact.
- 5. Overestimating Danger:** Residents in this circular thought process think that something bad is going to happen at any moment, such as having a heart attack or dying.
- 6. Jumping to Conclusions:** When a senior suffers from this type of thought pattern, they make negative conclusions about situations, even though there may be little or no evidence on which to base the assumptions.

*A common theme in all of these thinking traps is focusing on the negative – even if things are going well. And this can lead to increased stress and anxiety among residents.*

**80%**

**of our thoughts  
are negative, and  
95% repetitive.**

# How to Help Seniors Break Free

*When thinking traps go unchecked, and residents focus on the negative, it can impact their mood, confidence and relationships. To help your seniors get out of negative thought patterns, here are some ways your community can help seniors embrace more balanced thinking and better respond to life situations.*

- 1. Listen:** Give them a chance to share what they are thinking, even if it is negative. Acknowledge their concerns and let them know you understand that recognizing their negative thought process is an important first step to changing thinking traps.
- 2. Help Them Understand the Root Source:** In many cases, there may be a source for a resident's negative thoughts. For example, they could be in response to trauma. Since negative thinking is the effect and not the cause, suggest residents seek mental health support if they experienced an event that may be behind their negativity so they can address it.
- 3. Provide Opportunities for Mindfulness:** If you don't already, consider offering mindfulness activities like meditation or yoga. These opportunities can help residents detach and view their thoughts from an objective observer's point of view, which may give them more control over their emotional reactions to situations.
- 4. Focus on the Positive:** Sometimes, elders' thought patterns are so ingrained that it can be challenging to change them. However, by helping residents replace negativity with a focus on things they love and appreciate, it can help them counter the thinking traps with positivity.
- 5. Suggest Resources:** Make sure residents understand that there are resources available that can help. For example, they may want to work with a professional for cognitive behavioral therapy to identify problematic thought patterns and techniques they can use to reshape negative thinking.





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