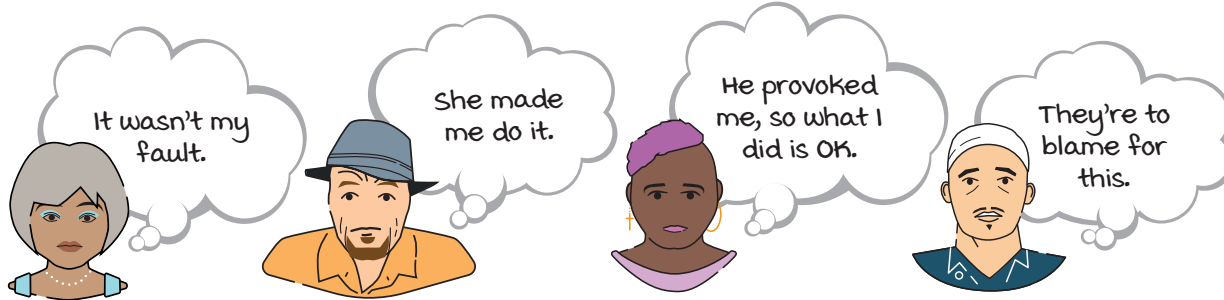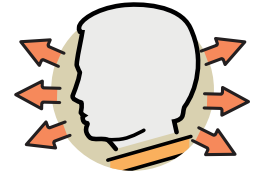# Externalising

When we feel strong emotions – such as fear, sadness, shame, or hopelessness – we have often just had an *automatic thought*. These thoughts can happen so quickly and effortlessly that we are not even aware we've had them. It can take practice to notice them as they arise. Automatic thoughts often feel convincing, but they are not always 100% accurate.

They are often *exaggerated*, *biased*, *distorted*, or *unrealistic*. There are different types of biases, which psychologists call *cognitive distortions* or *unhelpful thinking styles*. We all think in exaggerated ways sometimes, but it can become a problem if your thoughts are distorted very often or very strongly.

Externalisation (or 'defensive attribution') is a style of thinking where you blame others for negative events and avoid taking personal responsibility. The reasons for this might include protecting your self-esteem, justifying your actions, or coping with difficult feelings like shame. While it might seem helpful, externalising can have a negative impact on you and your relationships, and stop you addressing your difficulties.

Externalising is common across a wide range of problems:

Addictions · Anger · Anxiety · Complicated grief · Chronic pain · Depression · Narcissism · Paranoia · Perfectionism · PTSD · Relationship problems · Shame · Stress

Overcoming externalising

Noticing and labelling

The first step in overcoming externalisation is catching it. Practise self-monitoring so that you get better at noticing these thoughts as they arise. When you notice one, say something to yourself like:

- "I'm externalising again."
- "There's another externalisation."

Mind your language

Changing the words you use in externalising thoughts can help you think more flexibly, take more responsibility, and defuse intense emotions.

- Own your experience: "She makes me angry" > "I feel angry"
- Be less extreme in your judgements: "He is to blame" > "He is partly to blame"
- Swap blame for a preference: "She should have" > "I'd prefer it if she …"
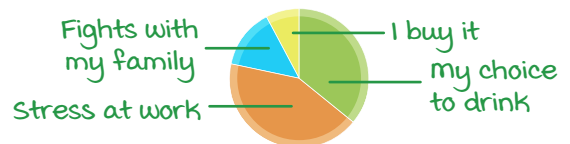
Consider other causes

Negative events rarely have a single cause. Rather than blaming someone else, list all the things that may have contributed to it (including yourself). You could use a pie chart to explore how influential each factor was.

Drinking too much

Fights with my family · I buy it · Stress at work · my choice to drink

Pros and cons

Externalising is a choice. Make a list of the pros and cons of blaming others versus the different attitudes you could have. Ask yourself:

- "What are the pros and cons of blaming someone else for this?"
- "What are the pros and cons of taking responsibility for this?"
- "What are the pros and cons of accepting the situation without judgement?"

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