Biases in thinking

Case Study

Thursday 10th April. 6.30 p.m. I had been on at my daughter all day long to tidy her room and she kept saying she would do it in a minute, or a bit later. Then, at about half past six I found her sitting in the bath just washing her hair – and deliberately provoking me, saying, 'What are you going to do about that, then?'

Selective perception

This means just what it sounds like: in other words, a person sees part of the story but not the whole story. For example, in the case of Amy's twelve-year-old daughter sitting in the bath washing her hair, she was indeed 'not tidying her room' — but that was only part of the story. She was also keeping herself clean and tidy. In fact, as it turns out, this was particularly relevant because she was appearing in a school play the next morning, so it was relevant that she was 'well turned out'. However, to her mother's perception she was simply 'not tidying her room'.

Mind-reading

Again, this is exactly what it says. In our example it is manifested by Amy saying: 'She does it deliberately to wind me up.' How does she know her daughter does it to wind her up? The only possible answer can be by mind-reading. The point is that mind-reading is impossible, as far as we know. Amy has no idea whether her daughter is really trying to wind her up deliberately or not, so it is unhelpful to jump to that conclusion. She might just as well jump to the opposite conclusion, that her daughter is not trying to wind her up deliberately. This is a very common way of thinking: many people assume that the person who irritates them does it deliberately.

All or nothing thinking

This is where, when we don't get what we want, we will see the situation as 'awful'. So, to take this example again, whereas some mothers, having failed to get their daughters to tidy their rooms, would tell somebody else: 'I wish I could get my daughter to tidy her room. Do you know I spent all day nagging her to do it yesterday and still she didn't do it', other mothers will see it as 'awful' and 'the end of the world'. It is an example of 'all or nothing thinking': seeing things as either wonderful or terrible, either perfect or awful, etc. It is good practice to develop the habit of thinking and talking in shades of grey, where, for example, events may be 'not as I want' but are not necessarily 'awful'.

Use of emotive language

Which is the particularly emotive word that Amy used about her twelve-year-old daughter? The one that I would pick out is 'defiant'. She viewed her daughter as being deliberately

defiant. This is a very strong word designed to make adversaries of mother and daughter. If one person defies another, then surely it is the first person's duty to overcome that defiance. This is likely to be a very unhelpful way of phrasing things.

Incidentally, although I am writing this as though we are talking out loud to somebody else, when we make our judgements the 'conversation' is with ourselves, so the language is even more emotive. We can think nothing of referring to other people, even our own family, using words we may never use out loud about anybody to anybody!

Overgeneralisation

This is where we notice a particular observation that is true (e.g. that the girl in question has not tidied her room) and then make a sweeping generalisation from that fact (e.g. 'She's bone idle' or 'She never does anything I ask her to'). It is usually far better to stick to the accurate statement, i.e. 'It is difficult to get her to tidy her room.' This of course puts her on a par with just about every other youngster, and it also clarifies what the problem is (trying to get her to tidy her room). Overgeneralisations are very common and usually very destructive.