Notes and resources from a TiS Member:

I attended Dr. Iris Mauss' resilience seminar in January 2019, and one attendee asked about how to improve regulation of emotions if one is a part of the subset of the population that does not regulate their emotions very well (or something along those lines!).

My therapist provided me with a document entitled "Some Common Thinking Traps (Cognitive Distortions)" that I have found to be very useful. Most everyone can identify a few or more of these types of traps listed in their day-to-day life, but the key part of this document is that it provides questions to break out of that cognitive distortion. When one is attempting to regulate emotions, it can be helpful to recognize which thinking trap is leading to the emotion and practice answering the questions associated with that trap.

To give an example, I struggle with a combination between overgeneralizing and catastrophizing. Usually, my though process goes: I had a negative result in lab today. → I will never finish this project. → I will never finish graduate school. The question that helps break that train of thought is "Am I sure this horrible outcome will happen?" to which I have to answer "No". This has been of great value to me in the past year, and I hope it will be of use to some of you, too.

Please see the resources on the following pages.
SOME COMMON THINKING TRAPS
(Cognitive Distortions)

Here is a list of some common thinking errors. Everyone falls into these thinking traps sometimes. Many of them are similar. The important thing is not so much to differentiate them as to notice them when they occur and consider alternatives with the following questions:

OVERGENERALIZATION: You view a single negative event as a continuing or never-ending pattern. Words like always, never, all, every, no one and everyone are tip-offs.

Ex. “I’ll never be happy.” “I always mess up.” “I get rejected by everyone.”
“No one cares about me.” “Parties are never any fun.”

QUESTION: Is there or has there ever been any exception to this?

POLARIZED THINKING: You view things in dichotomous, all/nothing, either/or categories.

Ex. “Either get a 4.0 GPA or I’m a failure.” “If I’m not perfect, then I’m worthless.”
“If I’m not talkative and funny in a social group, then I’m a bore.”

QUESTION: Might this behavior be on a continuum? If so, could there a position that’s “in between”?

MENTAL FILTERING: You selectively pay attention to negatives & ignore or discount positives.

Ex. You think, “Look at all the people who don’t like me” and discount those who do.
You give a class presentation that gets good reviews, but one person makes a critical comment and you focus your attention on that and feel inadequate.

QUESTION: Am I considering the whole picture? Are there positives I’m overlooking?

MIND READING: You assume you know what other people are thinking without checking out your assumptions.

Ex. You pass a friend on campus who doesn’t say hello and think they don’t like you.
You don’t approach someone because you imagine they won’t be interested in you.
You think, “I hate getting emotional because then people think I’m weak.”

QUESTION: Do I know for certain what someone else is thinking?

FORTUNE TELLING: You predict or expect that something will turn out badly and believe your prediction is a fact.

Ex. You don’t go to a party because you think you won’t have a good time.
You believe you won’t be able to change so you don’t even bother trying.
You say to yourself: “I won’t do well on my exam,” or “That gathering will be a drag.”

QUESTION: How do I know for sure what will happen? Could it turn out differently?
SELF-BLAMING: You assume a disproportionate amount of responsibility & blame for negative events.

Ex. Your friend arrives late and you think, “I did something wrong.”
You go out to eat with a friend who doesn’t like the food (s)he orders and you say,
“I’m sorry; I never should’ve picked this restaurant.”
You break up with someone and think: “I messed everything up.”
QUESTION: Is this a realistic view of myself and my responsibility in this situation?

SELF-DEFEATING COMPARISON: You compare yourself selectively with other people so you end up feeling badly about yourself.

Ex. Another student makes an interesting comment in class and you think, “I’m not as smart as (s)he is, so I’m not going to say anything in this class.”
QUESTION: Would it be better to focus on myself & my performance instead of others?

EMOTIONAL REASONING: You assume that what you feel about yourself, others or life is factual and true.

Ex. “I feel powerless, so there’s nothing I can do.”
“I feel inferior and inadequate, so I must not be as good as others.”
QUESTION: Does having my emotion mean that that’s the way things actually are?

LABELING: Attaching negative labels to yourself, others or whole groups based on one behavior.

Ex. You make a mistake and think “I’m a fool and an idiot.”
Someone declines a date and you think, “I’m such a loser.”
A roommate doesn’t do a chore, you think, “(S)he’s lazy.”
QUESTION: Am I exaggerating? Are there any exceptions to the label?

CATASTROPHIZING: You expect a disaster or believe the worst possible outcome will occur.

Ex. Your heart starts beating fast and you think, “Oh no, I’m having a heart attack.”
You start thinking, “It’ll be horrible if I fail; my reputation will be ruined.”
QUESTION: Am I sure this horrible outcome will happen? Could there be another explanation or outcome?
Even if this does happen, can I find a way to cope and deal with the situation?

SHOULD STATEMENTS: You make inflexible demands on yourself or others about how things “should” or “must” or “ought to” be, rather than focusing on “what is.”

Ex. I think, “I should never make a mistake.” “People shouldn’t be rude.”
“I shouldn’t feel angry.” “The stupid bus should be on time.”
QUESTION: Would it be better to lower my expectations? Can I tolerate a less-than-perfect outcome? Could I use less rigid language like “it would be better if…”?