

**"Watch your thoughts;
they become your words.
Watch your words;
they become your actions.
Watch your actions;
they become your habits.
Watch your habits;
they become your character.
Watch your character;
it becomes your destiny."**

—Frank Outlaw
(20th-century American writer)

Creating Meaning

Below are some meanings typical of people with trauma and substance abuse. Read each meaning and, if you want, rate how much you believe each one from 0% (never) through 100% (all the time). If you can think of examples from your own life, write them in the margins.

Meanings That Harm	Definition	Rate (0%–100%)	Examples	Meanings That Heal
Deprivation Reasoning	Because you have suffered a lot, you need substances (or other self-destructive behavior).		"I've had a hard time, so I'm entitled to get high." "If you went through what I did, you'd hurt yourself too."	Live Well. A happy, functional life will make up for your suffering far more than will hurting yourself. Focus on positive steps to make your life better.
I'm Crazy	You believe that you shouldn't feel the way you do.		"I must be crazy to feel this upset." "I shouldn't be having this craving."	Honor Your Feelings. You are not crazy. Your feelings make sense in light of what you have been through. You can get over them by talking about them and learning to cope with them.
Time Warp	Your sense of time is distorted; you believe that a negative feeling will go on forever.		"This craving won't stop." "If I were to cry, I would never stop."	Observe Real Time. Take a clock and time how long it really lasts. Negative feelings will usually subside after a while; often they will go away sooner if you distract with activities.
Beating Yourself Up	In your mind, you yell at yourself and put yourself down.		"I'm a bad person." "My family was right: I'm worthless."	Love—Not Hate—Creates Change. Beating yourself up may echo what people in the past have said to you. But yelling at yourself does not change your behavior; in fact, it makes you less likely to change. Care and understanding promote real change.
The Past Is the Present	Because you were a victim in the past, you are a victim in the present.		"I can't trust anyone." "I'm trapped."	Notice Your Power. Stay in the present: "I am an adult (not a child); I have choices (I am not trapped); I am getting help (I am not alone)."

(cont.)

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Meanings That Harm	Definition	Rate (0%–100%)	Examples	Meanings That Heal
The Escape	An escape is necessary (e.g., food, substances, gambling) because feelings are just too painful.		"I'm upset; I have to binge on food." "I can't stand cravings; I have to smoke a joint."	Keep Growing. Emotional growth and learning are the only real escape from pain. You can learn to tolerate feelings and solve problems.
The Good Old Days	You remember the wonderful highs from something (a drug, an abusive relationship), but ignore the tragedy of it.		"Cocaine made me feel happy." "I still love my partner, even though he abused me."	See Both Sides. The drug may have felt good but the cost was losing your job; the relationship may have had some positives, but it had some serious negatives too.
Feelings Are Reality	Because something <i>feels</i> true, you believe it must be a <i>fact</i> .		"I feel like I'll never recover, so I might as well drink." "I feel depressed, so I might as well kill myself."	Listen to What You Know. Use your mind rather than your feelings as a guide. What do you know to be best for you? Feelings are valid, but they are not <i>reality</i> .
Ignoring Cues	If you don't notice a problem, it will go away.		"If I ignore this toothache it will go away." "I don't have a problem with substances."	Attend to Your Needs. Listen to what you're hearing; notice what you're seeing; believe your gut feeling.
Dangerous Permission	You give yourself permission for self-destructive behavior.		"Just one won't hurt." "I'll buy a bottle of wine for the recipe I want to try."	Seek Safety. Acknowledge your urges and feelings, and then find a safe way to cope with them.
The Squeaky Wheel Gets the Grease	If you get better you will not get as much attention from people.		"If I do well, my therapist will focus on sicker patients." "No one will listen to me unless I'm in distress."	Get Attention from Success. People love to pay attention to success. If you don't believe this, try doing better and notice how people respond to you.
Mind Reading	You believe you can tell what other people are thinking without having to ask.		"I know he didn't say hello because he hates me." "My sponsor would feel burdened if I called her late at night."	Check It Out. Ask the person! You may be amazed by what you find out.

Meanings That Harm	Definition	Rate (0%–100%)	Examples	Meanings That Heal
It's All My Fault	Everything that goes wrong is due to you.		"The trauma was my fault." "If I have a disagreement with someone, it means I'm doing something wrong."	Give Yourself a Break. You do not have to carry the world on your shoulders. When you have conflicts with others, try taking a 50–50 approach (50% is their responsibility, 50% is yours). Stay in the Present. Whatever you need to do, start now. Every step forward counts. Putting off an important goal will not help.
If This ... Then That	You put off something important while waiting for something else.		"If I get a job, then I'll stop smoking pot." "If I lose weight, then I'll go to AA."	Break through the Silence. Put feelings into words. Language is the most powerful way for people to know you.
Actions Speak Louder Than Words	You show your distress by actions; otherwise, people won't see your pain.		"The scratches on my arm will show what I feel." "I'd like my partner to find my body after I've killed myself."	Create a Broad Identity. You are more than what you have suffered. Think of your different roles in life, your varied interests, your goals and hopes.
I Am My Trauma	Your trauma is your identity; it is more important than anything else about you.		"My life is pain." "I am what I have suffered."	Reach Out. Give people a chance to help you. Find a safe person to talk to (therapist, AA sponsor) and try opening up.
The Uniqueness Fallacy	You alone have a particular problem; no one else could possibly understand.		"Unless you've lived through what I have, you can't help me." "Why bother talking? No one will get it."	You Have Choices. No matter what has happened so far, you control the present and future. Notice your choices and choose wisely.
No Future	The future is bleak; there is no hope.		"My life is wasted already." "I might as well give up."	Keep Perspective. What is the worst that can happen? If you suffer a loss, you can learn to mourn and move on. The possibilities in life are endless.
Life-or-Death Thinking	Things take on life-or-death meaning in your mind.		"I'll never get over the fact that she (or he) left me." "I'll die if I don't get that job."	

(cont.)

Meanings That Harm	Definition	Rate (0%–100%)	Examples	Meanings That Heal
Confusing Needs and Wants	You want something very badly, so that means you have to have it.		"I need to relax with heroin." "I need to find a romantic partner."	Recovery is the Need. You may want many things, but needs are few. You may want heroin, but you do not need heroin. Needs are essentials: food, shelter, clothes—and your recovery!
Short-Term Thinking	You focus only on your feelings today rather than tomorrow.		"I'm more sociable when I drink." "I'm buying that new outfit even if I can't afford it."	Think of the Consequences. Imagine how good you'll feel about yourself tomorrow if you do what you know is right. Imagine how low you'll feel if you give in to the moment.
Shoulds	You have rules about how the world should work. If the rules are violated, you feel angry.		"My friend should invite me over." "I should not have to deal with the PTSD."	Soften Your Language. Try to ease the tension (e.g., "I want my friend to invite me over."). You may still want what you want, but you may feel more tolerant.
Instant Satisfaction	You seek immediate satisfaction. Life should be easy.		"I need it now." "I should always feel good."	Work Hard. The most enduring satisfactions come from working hard and having patience: at your job, at relationships, at recovery.
Focusing on the Negative	You notice the negatives in a situation and ignore the positives.		"That person is a total jerk." "I can't do anything right."	Notice the Good. What went right? What is good about you? What was a positive aspect of the situation?
All-or-None Thinking	Things are either all good or all bad. There is no middle ground.		"Life is only misery." "I have no power."	Seek a Balanced View. Life is more complex and interesting than "all or none." Look at things with a balanced view; find the middle ground. Look at what went well, what went badly, and what was neutral.

Acknowledgments: In this handout, several of the harmful meanings ("Mind Reading," "Shoulds," "Focusing on the Negative," "All-or-None Thinking," and "Feelings Are Reality") are from Burns (1980), with the latter termed "emotional reasoning" in his book. "Life-or-Death Thinking" and "Instant Satisfaction" are from Beck and colleagues (1993) and "The Good Old Days" is from Earley (1991). Ask your therapist for guidance if you would like to locate any of these sources.