Common Cognitive Conditions: Shoulditis, Oughtism and Musterbation

In my clinical work, I notice that people often think in absolute terms, giving themselves little flexibility or room for error. Over the years I have referred to some of these thinking patterns as *Shoulditis, Oughtism* and *Musterbation.* These are not original terms that I made up, but they are helpful in assisting clients to identify areas where they could be easier on themselves. Here is a brief overview of each one, and some suggestions as to what you can do if you suffer with these common conditions.

Shoulditis

Do you ever have that feeling that you should have your life all figured out, that you should have areas of your life more organized, that you should be a better parent, or maybe you have lists of things you should get done? Should is a self-imposed measuring stick against which you will inevitably fall short, and it creates a feeling of anxiety in your body whenever you think of it.

Oughtism

Oughtism stems from a strong sense of obligation and has been said to stem from a dysfunction in the oughtonomic nervous system (okay I made that last bit up). In all seriousness, many of us do things because we feel we ought to. We don't really want to volunteer for that extra work, or go out on a cold evening for a social event a friend told us we ought to go to, but we do it and then feel bad, wishing we had been more assertive in the first place.

Musterbation

Albert Ellis, a famous psychologist, coined the phrase 'Musterbation' which he used to describe the phenomenon where people place unrealistic and absolute demands on themselves and those around them, such as "I must try harder" (TRY is another word to avoid where possible by the way). We can also use the word musterbation in daily language, such as "he was suffering from a serious case of musterbation about getting a perfect score in all his exams."

With these conditions, the things we say to ourselves set standards we cannot meet, and we are left feeling bad and frustrated. It is an easy spiral from here down into a depressed or anxious state.

So, what can you do to change your thinking patterns? The first step is awareness of what you are saying to yourself. Monitor your thoughts, notice when they leave you feeling uncomfortable, and if necessary write them down to draw your attention to what you are doing.

The next step is not to beat yourself up for what you are doing. It is a pattern you have slipped into and now you see it, you can change it.

Finally, take your should, ought and must statements and rephrase them as wishes or desires. For example, I would like to be more successful, I want to spend more time playing with my kids. While you are doing that, listen to yourself and ask if you *really* do want to do all those things? If you don't want to, challenge your assumption and figure out what you would rather be doing instead, then act on it.

And remember, life is short, so don't live it in a way that isn't true to who you are and what you want!