Labelling

When a person experiences an unhelpful emotion (eg, depression or anxiety), it is usually preceded by several unhelpful self-statements and thoughts. Often there is a pattern to such thoughts and we call these, "unhelpful thinking styles".

One of the things we have noticed is that people use unhelpful thinking styles as an automatic habit. It is something that happens out of our awareness. However, when a person consistently and constantly uses some of these styles of thinking, they can often cause themselves a great deal of emotional distress.

One of these thinking styles is called "labelling." You can probably think of times when you've bumped something off the table, or dropped a glass while washing the dishes and perhaps thought to yourself, "I'm such an idiot!" Similarly, your friend may have acted kind and considerate at other times, but something may have prevented them from calling you to say they can't make it to your birthday dinner, and you think, "They are so inconsiderate".

It's a little like overgeneralising about people. If you were to consistently label yourself or others in this way, what effect do you think this would have on how you feel? If you were to step back from the situation and take a closer look, you might realise that breaking a glass doesn't mean that you're an "idiot", and the fact that you are competent in your job, or can communicate effectively with your family, might suggest otherwise.

When we make global statements about ourselves or other people, which are based only on behaviour in specific situations, then we are labelling. The problem is that by defining a person by one specific behaviour - and - usually one that we consider negative, we ignore the other positive characteristics and actions.

Can you think of a situation where you have used this thinking style?

Briefly describe the situation.	What were the thoughts that went through your mind?	What feelings did you experience consequent to your thinking?