

Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions are irrational thoughts that can influence your emotions. Everyone experiences cognitive distortions to some degree, but in their more extreme forms they can be harmful.

Magnification and Minimization: Exaggerating or minimizing the importance of events. One might believe their own achievements are unimportant, or that their mistakes are excessively important.

Catastrophizing: Seeing only the worst possible outcomes of a situation.

Overgeneralization: Making broad interpretations from a single or few events. "I felt awkward during my job interview. I am *always* so awkward."

Magical Thinking: The belief that acts will influence unrelated situations. "I am a good person—bad things shouldn't happen to me."

Personalization: The belief that one is responsible for events outside of their own control. "My mom is always upset. She would be fine if I did more to help her."

Jumping to Conclusions: Interpreting the meaning of a situation with little or no evidence.

Mind Reading: Interpreting the thoughts and beliefs of others without adequate evidence. "She would not go on a date with me. She probably thinks I'm ugly."

Fortune Telling: The expectation that a situation will turn out badly without adequate evidence.

Emotional Reasoning: The assumption that emotions reflect the way things really are. "I feel like a bad friend, therefore I must be a bad friend."

Disqualifying the Positive: Recognizing only the negative aspects of a situation while ignoring the positive. One might receive many compliments on an evaluation, but focus on the single piece of negative feedback.

"Should" Statements: The belief that things should be a certain way. "I should always be friendly."

All-or-Nothing Thinking: Thinking in absolutes such as "always", "never", or "every". "I never do a good enough job on anything."

The Cognitive Model

Practice Exercises

✓ Examples

See how two people can experience the same situation in different ways based upon their thoughts. Each example depicts a negative and rational thought, and a typical outcome of each thinking style.

Situation: Jason and Kurt both receive a negative evaluation at work.

Jason

Negative Thought: “I can’t do anything right. I bet I get fired because of this!”

Emotion: Depressed and nervous.

Behavior: Jason avoids his boss because he believes he’s in trouble. He feels nervous the next time he’s confronted with challenging work, and performs poorly.

Kurt

Rational Thought: “I guess I didn’t work hard enough—I’ll have to come up with a better plan for next time.”

Emotion: Disappointed but motivated.

Behavior: Kurt seeks out his boss to talk about how he can improve. He approaches his next task as a challenge and gradually improves.

Situation: Gwen and Shirley both have an argument with a close friend.

Gwen

Negative Thought: “We *always* argue! Why can’t she ever see my side? This is so unfair.”

Emotion: Angry and blaming.

Behavior: Gwen stays angry at her friend and does not reach out to repair the relationship. Over time, Gwen’s friendship becomes more and more toxic.

Shirley

Rational Thought: “That was rough—I should apologize. We can both be stubborn sometimes.”

Emotion: Forgiving and regretful.

Behavior: Shirley accepts a portion of the responsibility and apologizes to her friend. They communicate and continue to strengthen their relationship.

The Cognitive Model

Practice Exercises

Practice

Write down an alternative *rational* thought for each situation. What do you think the resulting emotion and behavior might be?

Situation: Emily is cut off by another driver and has to quickly hit her brakes.

Negative Thought: "What a jerk! They don't care about *anyone* but themselves. I could've crashed!"

Emotion: Angry

Behavior: Emily drives aggressively to provoke the driver who cut her off. Emily is still angry when she gets home, and yells at her family.

Rational Thought:

New Emotion and Behavior:

Situation: Travis notices his wife hasn't helped around the house for a week.

Negative Thought: "Does she even care? She knows I'll clean up, so she abuses my kindness!"

Emotion: Angry and sad.

Behavior: Travis lets the dishes pile up and doesn't say anything to his wife. He doesn't ask why she hasn't helped, and becomes angrier when he assumes she's just selfish.

Rational Thought:

New Emotion and Behavior:

The Cognitive Model

Practice Exercises

Situation: Regina is invited to a birthday party by an acquaintance.

Negative Thought: "I won't know anyone at this party and I'll just seem out of place. She probably invited me because she felt obligated."

Emotion: Sad and anxious.

Behavior: Regina lies and tells her friend she already has plans for the night of her party. Regina and her friend fail to develop their friendship.

Rational Thought:

New Emotion and Behavior:

Situation: Thom notices a girl on the bus who keeps looking his direction.

Negative Thought: "Do I have something on my face? Is my fly down? Maybe I smell bad or something. I need to get home and take a shower."

Emotion: Self-conscious and anxious.

Behavior: Thom avoids the girl and rushes off the bus without looking up from his shoes.

Rational Thought:

New Emotion and Behavior: