

Identifying Cognitive Distortions*

In this lesson, you will learn the most common ways that our twisted or distorted ways of thinking can cause feelings of anxiety or depression. We call these unrealistic and inaccurate ways of thinking 'cognitive distortions'. First, familiarize yourself with the common distortions below. Put a star next to the one's that come up for you most often. If any come up multiple x daily, put 2 or 3 stars. Later, we'll work on changing some of these distortions.

Cognitive Distortion	Description	Examples
All or Nothing Thinking	Evaluating yourself and others in extremes, seeing things as all or nothing. This cognitive style is the basis for perfectionism. In reality, nothing in life is absolute. No one, including you, is either 100% good or 100% bad. Similarly, one setback or mistake does not make you a bad person just as your personality is not determined by one good or bad trait alone.	1) After getting a failing grade on one test, you think, "I'm a <u>complete</u> failure and now I have the grade to prove it." 2) When you're upset at your husband, you think, "He <u>never</u> listens to what I say!" 3) You get an essay back in a class and see that you missed a few points for grammatical errors. You think that the <u>entire</u> essay was a waste of time and effort because it wasn't perfect.
Overgeneralization	Thinking that because something happened to you once it will continue to happen over and over again.	1) You may say to yourself, "I always have three tests to take in one week. That's just my luck." In reality, if you look back over the semester, there have rarely been weeks where you had three tests to take and many weeks where you didn't even have any tests. 2) After getting in your first car accident, you think "This just proves what I've always known. I'm an awful driver." 3) You get upset when the checkout line at the store is moving slowly and think, "This figures. I always get the slowest checkout line."
Mental Filter	Picking out the negative aspects of any situation and focusing solely on those instead of looking for the possible good in a situation.	1) At a party, someone may give you an awkward look, and instead of focusing on all the smiles directed at you that night, you focus only on the one strange glance. 2) One day you accidentally wear mismatched socks and all day you think, "Everybody's staring at me because I look so silly in mismatched socks." 3) You

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Disqualifying the Positive	Transforming neutral or even positive events into negative ones by mentally skewing them. Most people do this in the way they respond to compliments. Instead of taking it to heart when someone offers praise, many of us rationalize it away by thinking that they were just saying it to be nice and must not have meant it.	<p>obsess about the one question you weren't sure of on the test and forget about all the others that you knew.</p> <p>1) When severely depressed, many people tend to fall into the trap of thinking that no one loves or cares about them. When reminded that their friends care about them, they disqualify this by saying, "They don't know the real me." Even though there is ample evidence that their family loves them, they discount that positive evidence. 2) Your friend tells you that you look nice or are smart, but you think she must just be saying it to be nice. 3) Your little brother says how much he looks up to you, but what does he know? He's just a little kid.</p>
Jumping to Conclusions: Mind Reading	Assuming that others are judging you or think poorly of you even in the face of evidence to the contrary. You know what someone else is thinking even if they have not told you.	<p>1) Your friend yawns while you are talking to her and you think to yourself, "She thinks I'm boring and would rather not be talking to me right now." 2) While giving a speech in front of your class, you forget what you were going to say and have a long pause in your speech. You think, "Everyone in the class must think I look like an idiot up here." 3) While you're on a date, your date checks her phone and you think, "She doesn't like me. I'm so boring."</p>
The Fortune Teller Error	You think that bad things are going to happen, and you take this to be the truth. This kind of thinking can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy—because you think these negative things will happen in the future, you subconsciously bring them about.	<p>1) You tell yourself that studying for your test won't make a difference because you're going to fail it anyway, so you don't study. 2) You meet a cute girl in one of your classes, but you think, "There's no way she'd say yes if I asked her on a date." You don't ask her out. 3) Before a job interview, you have difficulty identifying things you're good at and you predict that you won't get the job.</p>

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Magnification and Minimization	Blowing things out of proportion or not emphasizing them enough. You magnify the negative things and minimize the positive. This cognitive distortion is often called “catastrophizing,” because you turn everyday negative life events into catastrophes. Many perfectionists struggle with this cognitive distortion in particular.	1) You believe that because you failed one quiz you will fail that class and it will ruin your GPA and you’ll never get a good job after graduation. 2) You get to work 10 minutes late and think, “I’m going to get fired because I was late. My boss probably thinks I’m a lazy slacker because I can’t even show up to work on time.” 3) You win a prestigious writing award, but when people compliment you on it, you brush their praise aside and say, “Oh, it’s nothing. It really isn’t a big deal at all.”
Emotional Reasoning	Taking your emotions to be evidence of the truth.	1) You reason that since your depression feels hopeless, you must be hopeless and will never get better. 2) You feel uncomfortable in social situations, so you reason that you must be complete dork. 3) Going into a test, you feel nervous and assume that since you’re nervous, you must not be prepared for the test. Otherwise, why would you be nervous?
Should Statements	Trying to motivate yourself to do things by saying, “I should clean my room,” or “I should do my assigned reading.” Talking to yourself like this makes you feel guilty when you don’t accomplish these things and puts unwarranted pressure on yourself. Similarly, you apply these should statements to others, thinking “He should be nicer to me,” or “She should be on time.” Thinking this way about others sets expectations in your mind that others may sometimes fail to meet. This causes you to feel unnecessary resentment toward them.	1) Your roommates leave their dirty dishes in the sink, and you think, “They should clean those up!” 2) After your computer crashed and you lost all your work on your essay, you think, “That shouldn’t have happened to me! It’s not fair!” 3) You get home from school and are exhausted. You think about going to the gym, but fall asleep on the couch instead. When you wake up, you think, “I should have worked out instead of wasting time sleeping.” This just makes you feel more guilty for not going.
Labeling and Mislabeling	Creating an entirely negative self-image based on your faults, an extreme form of overgeneralization.	1) You tell yourself you’re a failure because you fail one test. In reality, who we are is not made up of any one event or thing you do. 2) You spill paint on your clothes while

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		working in your art studio and mentally call yourself 'clumsy' or an 'idiot.' 3) Your husband is late getting home from work and isn't answering his cell phone and you are worried sick about what could have happened to him. When he finally does get home and you find out that he was just stuck in traffic, you tell yourself that you're a "useless worrier."
Personalization	You take responsibility for negative events that aren't your fault.	1) Your friend makes a bad choice and you think it's your fault because you should have been a better example to her. 2) Lately it's seemed like your girlfriend has been unhappy in your relationship. You think it must be because you aren't being a good enough boyfriend for her. 3) Your research team enters a contest but doesn't win, and you think it's because you didn't work hard enough on the project or contribute enough.

Try It: Identifying Your Preferred Distortions

What distortions does your mind tend to produce the most? How are these distortions related to your mood?

* These distortions have been adapted from David Burns, *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, 1999.