

# COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

Cognitive distortions are patterns of thinking that are inaccurate and usually exaggerated. You may occasionally engage in them, as do most of us, but when used regularly, your mental health is adversely affected. They can trigger feelings such as:

- » Anxiety
- » Depression
- » Shame
- » Inferiority
- » Hopelessness and futility
- » Frustration

The identification and correction of cognitive distortions is a central focus of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in treating depression and anxiety. By recognizing and challenging these thoughts, you're able to restructure your thinking to more closely reflect reality and, in the process, stabilize your mood and reduce anxiety.

Although working with cognitive distortions usually focuses on their negative aspects, Dr. David Burns has pointed out that these distortions can also be positive. As you go through our list, keep in mind that each distortion has a mirror opposite. And, like negative distortions, positive cognitive distortions have adverse effects such as mania, impulsivity, addiction, emotional reactivity, and acting out.

This handout will focus primarily on the negative effects.

## ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING

You see things in black and white. There's an inability to look at the gray areas of a situation, and instead, you perceive things as either all good or all bad. If your performance falls short of perfect, you've failed. There's no recourse. An example would be eating a cookie when you're on a weight-loss diet and deciding you've blown the whole diet, so you give it up and chastise yourself repeatedly. Or maybe you decide that everything wrong happens to you, and nothing good ever happens, even though there's much evidence to the contrary.

## OVERGENERALIZATION

In this case, you engage in all-or-nothing thinking but focus on a single negative event that you generalize to the whole and project into the future. For example, you miss

your alarm in the morning and get a late start, so you decide the entire day is a wash. Nothing's going to go well. Or you overhear a co-worker complaining about you and decide everyone at work doesn't like you and is talking about you. Overgeneralizing paints the future in a negative light.

## MENTAL FILTER

You pick out a single negative detail or piece of information and dwell on it exclusively so that your total vision of reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that colors the entire beaker of water. You get one C on your report card and five A's, but you only see the C. You become pessimistic about your academic future.

## DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

Unlike mental filtering which focuses only on the negative, disqualifying the positive is an outright rejection of positive aspects of a situation by insisting they "don't count." It doesn't matter to you that you got five A's last semester—you got a C, and in your mind, that disqualifies your A's. Disqualifying the positive allows you to hold on to a negative belief even when other experiences or events contradict it.

## JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

You assume a negative interpretation of events even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusions. There are two types:

1. **MIND READING.** You assume that you know what another person is thinking, and react to your assumptions as though they're true. You might conclude that someone is having negative thoughts about you because they're frowning, even though there is no conclusive evidence this is true.
2. **FORTUNE TELLER ERROR.** You anticipate that things will turn out badly and convince yourself that your prediction is an already-established fact without any corroborating evidence. You're sure your boss wants to see you because he's going to fire you even though you've not been having trouble on the job.

## MAGNIFICATION OR MINIMIZING

Also called the "**binocular trick**," this one refers to either exaggerating the importance of something (such as your goof-up or someone else's achievement) or inappropriately shrinking things until they appear small (like your own desirable qualities or the other fellow's imperfections). Catastrophizing is the more common of the two and often

shows up when you're triggered by a small event that initiates a full-blown imagined debacle or tragedy. Your son doesn't answer his phone while away from the house, and you're sure that he's been in an auto accident and is severely injured or dead. On the other end of the spectrum (minimizing), your son often drives home late at night after drinking with friends, and you shrug it off as, *"Oh, he's just a college kid having fun."*

## EMOTIONAL REASONING

You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect how things are, even though the evidence is lacking: *"I feel it; therefore, it must be true."* You feel like your partner's mad at you, even though he hasn't done anything to indicate that's the case. Or, you feel like he's cheating on you, even though he's always loyal and attentive.

## SHOULD STATEMENTS

You try to motivate yourself with thoughts about what you should, shouldn't, ought, or must do. You create expectations for yourself and feel guilty when you don't reach them. Often, the expectations are exaggerated or unreasonable. For example, you believe you should help your friend whenever she needs you, even though she regularly takes advantage of you. You also hold others to the same high expectations and feel anger, frustration, or resentment when they don't live up to them. People who live by "shoulds" lack flexibility and an understanding of fundamental human flaws.

## LABELING AND MISLABELING

Labeling is an extreme form of overgeneralization. The difference is that instead of generalizing a negative event as the whole reality, you label yourself or another person in a generalized negative way. You miss one appointment because you forgot to put it on your calendar and call yourself "an incompetent loser." Or the guy who didn't return your text right away is labeled "a total louse!" Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.

## PERSONALIZATION

You see yourself as the cause of some adverse external event, which you were not primarily responsible for. Or you interpret events personally without considering other factors. Maybe your boss is grumpy Monday morning, and you decide he must be upset with you. It doesn't occur to you that he might be tired, stressed, or possibly hungover. Or, the boss is lecturing the whole staff at a staff meeting about not meeting company goals, and you interpret this to mean you are personally responsible for the failure.

# FALLACY DISTORTIONS

In addition to the above list, there are five more cognitive distortions called “*fallacy distortions*.” Here they are.

## CONTROL FALLACIES

This one's based on two erroneous beliefs as follows:

1. We have no control over our lives or what happens to us, but we are totally victims of fate.
2. We have complete control over the events of our lives and, as such, are also responsible for the feelings of others around us.

Both of these ideas are extreme. The reality is we have control over some aspects of our lives, yet not in every instance. Things happen to us outside of our control, yet we can control how we respond to them.

## FALLACY OF FAIRNESS

“*Life should be fair*” is the distorted thought that lies at the base of this fallacy. Although we would like things to be fair, sometimes they're not, and we have to learn to pivot when that happens and keep moving forward.

## FALLACY OF CHANGE

This fallacy crops up most often in intimate relationships. We believe we can make others change and that our happiness and well-being rest on those changes. “*If I can get my wife to stop nagging me about helping her with the chores, I would be much happier, and I might want to help her out.*”

## ALWAYS BEING RIGHT

This one's most common among perfectionists and sometimes narcissists. It's the belief that you must be right – not just sometimes, but always. It's as though your sense of self rests on it. If you're wrong, you feel destroyed. People who engage in this distortion are tortured and highly reactive when others don't agree with them or support their thoughts and opinions. They must win because not winning means being nothing. This fallacy is also a case of all-or-nothing thinking.

## HEAVEN'S REWARD FALLACY

*"If I work hard enough, struggle enough, and sacrifice enough, I'll be rewarded."*

Although this is sometimes true, there are instances where hard work and struggle don't lead to the outcome you want. Hard work is not the same as smart work, informed strategy, or knowing when to cut your losses. Sometimes, the right thing to do is to rethink something instead of just plowing forward.

## HOW TO COMBAT COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

The most commonly used method to deal with cognitive distortions is to challenge them systematically.

Here's a short version of the general exercise to do that.

### The "Triple Column Technique"

Take a piece of paper (or create a document on your computer) and make three columns.

Label column #1 "Automatic Thought."

Label column #2 "Cognitive Distortion."

Label column #3 "Rational Response."

[**Note:** You can format this any way you like, just so you have the three sections next to each other either horizontally or vertically so you can fill them in and write your responses.]

**STEP #1:** As you have critical thoughts or assumptions about yourself or situations, write them down in the first section.

**STEP #2:** Using the cognitive distortions list we've gone over, identify the distortion or distortions in your statement. Which ones are you using? Sometimes there's more than one.

**STEP #3:** Consider the evidence and other possibilities and write a corrected statement that more clearly represents reality based on your investigation. Your goal is not to write down something you don't believe is true but rather to challenge the distortions in your thinking and recognize alternative possibilities to your initial assumption.

## Example:

In column one, you write, *"I never do anything right."*

In column two, you would list overgeneralization and all-or-nothing thinking.

In column three, you would write a corrected statement: *"Sometimes I don't do things correctly, but in reality, I do a lot of things right, and I do more things right than wrong. Examples are \_\_\_\_\_."*

The process of challenging your thoughts and weighing evidence is quite effective. The good thing is that when you do that, your mood and outlook change, and sometimes significantly.

Doing this exercise will help uncover when and how much your thoughts are distorted, which can lead to feeling much better about yourself and your life.

## Suggested Reading:

For a full explanation of cognitive distortions, their impact, and how to counteract them, I recommend reading *Feeling Great: The Revolutionary New Treatment for Depression and Anxiety* by David D. Burns (2020); PESI Publishing & Media.

You can also find his work at <https://feelinggood.com/>.