

COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

Cognitive distortions are patterns of thinking that are inaccurate, exaggerated, and mostly negative. Most of us occasionally engage in them, but when used regularly, our mental health is adversely affected.

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

The following list includes fifteen of the most common cognitive distortions.

ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING

You see things in absolutes. There's an inability to look at the gray areas of a situation, and instead, you perceive circumstances as black or white - all good or all bad. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.

OVERGENERALIZATION

A single incident or event is generalized to the whole. You make one mistake on the job and conclude you're a terrible employee who can't perform your duties. Overgeneralizing often leads to a pattern of seeing things 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 vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that colors the entire beaker of water. You get one C on your report card and 5 As, but you only see the C. You become pessimistic about your academic future.

DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

In this case, you see the positives yet reject them by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or other. You maintain a negative belief and point of view, even though your experiences contradict it.

JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

You assume a negative interpretation of events even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion. 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 OF 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 tiny (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 "He's just being a college kid."

EMOTIONAL REASONING

You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things truly are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true." You "feel" your husband is upset with you, yet in truth, he's just preoccupied with a work problem.

SHOULD STATEMENTS

You try to motivate yourself with thoughts about what you should do, shouldn't do, ought to do, or must do. You create expectations for yourself and then feel guilty when you don't reach them. Often the expectations are exaggerated or unreasonable. You hold others to the same expectations and often feel anger, frustration or resentment when they don't live up to them. People who live by "shoulds" are lacking in 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 you call yourself “an incompetent loser.” Or the guy who didn’t return your text right away is labeled “a total louse!”

PERSONALIZATION

You take everything personally without considering other factors, or you see yourself as the cause of events without any evidence that you were to blame.

CONTROL FALLACIES

This one’s based on two erroneous beliefs:

1. We have no control over our lives or what happens to us, but are 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.

These are the extremes. 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 rests on that change. “If I can get my wife to stop nagging me about helping her with chores, then I would be much happier, and I might want to help her out.”

ALWAYS BEING RIGHT

This one is most common among perfectionists, and sometimes narcissists. It's the belief that you have to be right - not just sometimes, but all the time. 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.

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 thing 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.

Suggested Reading:

Burns M.D., David D. [*Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*](#) (p. 43). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

This book provides a more detailed description of the first ten cognitive distortions on our list. It also offers exercises to detect and correct them, including a discussion of how they intersect with depression. The author is a firm believer that exposing and re-working cognitive distortions will lead to personal growth as well as stabilize mood and reduce anxiety.