



Margaret Perry, LCSW

Mental and Behavioral Health Services

Managing Cognitive Distortions



Do you ever find yourself thinking things like "I always mess up" or "Nobody likes me" when something goes wrong? These kinds of thoughts can make us feel bad about ourselves, even though they're not always true. Experts call these sneaky thoughts "cognitive distortions."

What Are Cognitive Distortions?

Cognitive distortions are like wearing glasses that make everything look gloomy and twisted, even though it's not really that way. These thoughts can make us feel insecure or doubtful about ourselves and the world around us.

There are different types of cognitive distortions, like thinking in extremes, focusing only on the negative, or jumping to conclusions. It's important to learn to recognize these kinds of thoughts so we can manage how they make us feel.

Once we know what cognitive distortions are, there are things we can do to deal with them. We can practice mindfulness, write in a journal, or talk to someone we trust about how we're feeling. By challenging and changing these distorted thoughts, we can start to see things in a more balanced and positive way.

Cognitive Distortions

1. All or Nothing Thinking	You look at things in absolutes or as black and white. You see things only as either good or bad. There's no middle ground.
2. Overgeneralization	You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3. Mental Filter	You only notice the bad parts of a situation, ignoring any good parts.
4. Discounting the Positives	You insist that your accomplishments or positive qualities "don't count"
5. Jumping to Conclusions	a. Mindreading – You assume that people are reacting negatively to you when there's no definite evidence for this b. Fortune Telling – you arbitrarily predict things will turn out badly.
6. Magnification/Minimization	You exaggerate negatives and downplay positives.
7. Emotional Reasoning	You reason from how you feel: "I feel like an idiot, so I must be one." Or "I don't feel like doing this, so I'll put it off." Your feelings become facts.
8. Labeling	You define yourself by your mistakes or flaws. Instead of saying, "I made a mistake," you tell yourself, "I'm a jerk," or "a loser."
9. Personalization	You blame yourself for things outside your control.
10. Blame	You hold others responsible for your problems.
11. "Should" statements	You criticize yourself or other people with "should", "shouldn't", "must". You have a strict list of rules for you and others should act.
12. Catastrophic Thinking	You imagine that the worst possible thing could happen in each situation even through there is no evidence that this might be so.

Examples

1. All or Nothing Thinking	Imagine you're at work and you make a small mistake on a presentation. Instead of recognizing it as a minor error, you think, I've ruined everything.
2. Overgeneralization	Let's say you went for a job interview and didn't get the position. You think, I'll never get a job.
3. Mental Filter	Imagine you received feedback on a project. You did many things well, but you fixate on the one area of improvement suggested, completely ignoring the positive comments.
4. Discounting the Positives	You've been acknowledged for your hard work and receive a 'thank you' from your boss. Instead of feeling proud, you think, anyone could have done it; it's not a big deal.
5. Jumping to Conclusions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">Mindreading – You text a friend, and they don't reply immediately. You assume, they must be mad at me, even though there's no evidence to support this.Fortune Telling – You're about to give a speech and think, I'm going to forget my lines and embarrass myself, predicting things will go badly without any reason.
6. Magnification/Minimization	After a meeting, you focus on the one thing that went slightly wrong, blowing it out of proportion, while minimizing all the things that went right.
7. Emotional Reasoning	You feel anxious about a gathering and think, Because I feel scared, it must be a dangerous situation to go to.
8. Labeling	You forget to send an important email and think, I'm such an idiot. Instead of recognizing the mistake, you define yourself by it.
9. Personalization	Your child is having trouble in school, and you think, it must be my fault; I'm a bad parent.
10. Blame	When things go wrong in a group project, you think, this is all Sarah's fault.
11. "Should" statements	You tell yourself: I should never make mistakes. I must always be perfect.
12. Catastrophic Thinking	Before even stepping on a plane, you think, what if it crashes? What if something goes wrong?

Challenges

1. Identify the Distortion	Write down the bad thoughts you're having. This will help you figure out which of the ten thinking mistakes you're making. Once you know, it'll be easier to see the problem in a more positive and true-to-life way.
2. Examine the Evidence	Instead of believing every negative thought that pops into your head, take a closer look to see if it's really true. For instance, if you catch yourself thinking, I never do anything right, try to think of times you've done things well. Make a list of your successes, no matter how small they might seem.
3. The Double-Standard Method	Instead of being hard on yourself and saying mean things, try to talk to yourself like you would to a good friend who's having a tough time. Treat yourself with the same kindness.
4. The Experimental Technique	Try a test to see if your worry isn't true. For example, if you're scared to talk to new people because you think you'll say something silly, challenge yourself. Start a small conversation with someone you haven't talked to much before, maybe by asking about their day or giving a compliment. This could show you that talking to new people isn't as scary as you thought, and you can handle it just fine.
5. Thinking in Shades of Gray	Even though this idea might seem boring, the results can be eye-opening. Try not to see your problems as just good or bad. Instead, rate them on a scale from 0 to 100. When things don't go as planned, don't think of it as a total loss. Consider it a step towards success. Ask yourself, what can I learn from this?
6. The Survey Method	Talk to people and ask them questions to check if what you think and feel makes sense. For example, if you think getting nervous about speaking in front of others is weird or something to be embarrassed about, ask your friends if they have ever felt jittery before giving a talk.
7. Define Terms	When you call yourself inferior, a fool, or a loser, stop for a moment and think about what a fool really means. You'll start to feel better when you realize that nobody is completely a fool or a loser.
8. The Semantic Method	Switch to using words that are more straightforward and don't stir up strong feelings. This trick works well when you're dealing with thoughts that start with I should. For instance, rather than saying to yourself, I shouldn't have messed up, try saying, It would have been better if I didn't

mess up. This way, you're being kinder to yourself and looking at things a bit more calmly.

9. Re-attribution

Instead of thinking you're the problem and putting all the blame on yourself when something goes wrong, remember that a several things could have played a part. Try to focus your energy on figuring out how to fix the issue, rather than beating yourself up and feeling guilty.

10. Cost-Benefit Analysis

Explain the good and bad sides of a feeling, a negative thought, or a way you often act. For example, this could be feeling mad when things aren't right, eating too much when you're sad, or thinking you need to be perfect all the time.



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Thought Record

Use the chart below to help learn how to identify, challenge, and replace cognitive distortions with healthier ways of thinking. Choose a recent incident that you experienced a negative feeling and reflect on how it impacted how you felt about yourself.

Situation	Thought	Cognitive Distortion	Emotions	Belief About Self	Healthier Thought
I overslept and was late for work.	My boss is going to fire me. I'm always going to be a failure.	Catastrophizing; Personalization	Embarrassment; anxiety; frustrated	I am never going to be successful. I am not reliable or dependable.	I haven't been late before and I am a good worker. Next time, I'll go to be earlier instead of staying up late.