

Common Cognitive Distortions

What's a *cognitive distortion* and why do so many people have them? Cognitive distortions are simply ways that our mind convinces us of something that isn't really true. These inaccurate thoughts are usually used to reinforce negative thinking or emotions — telling ourselves things that sound rational and accurate, but really only serve to keep us feeling bad about ourselves.

For instance, a person might tell themselves, “I always fail when I try to do something new; I therefore fail at everything I try.” This is an example of “black or white” (or *polarized*) thinking. The person is only seeing things in absolutes — that if they fail at one thing, they must fail at **all** things. If they added, “I must be a complete loser and failure” to their thinking, that would also be an example of *overgeneralization* — taking a failure at one specific task and generalizing it their very self and identity.

Cognitive distortions are at the core of what many cognitive-behavioral and other kinds of therapists try and help a person learn to change in psychotherapy. By learning to correctly identify this kind of “stinkin’ thinkin’,” a person can then answer the negative thinking back, and refute it. By refuting the negative thinking over and over again, it will slowly diminish overtime and be automatically replaced by more rational, balanced thinking.

Cognitive Distortions

Aaron Beck first proposed the theory behind cognitive distortions and David Burns was responsible for popularizing it with common names and examples for the distortions.

1. Filtering.

We take the negative details and magnify them while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation. For instance, a person may pick out a single, unpleasant detail and dwell on it exclusively so that their vision of reality becomes darkened or distorted.

2. All or nothing Thinking

Things are either “black-or-white.” We have to be perfect or we're a failure—there is no middle ground. You place people or situations in “either/or” categories, with no shades of gray or allowing for the complexity of most people and situations. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.

3. Fortune Telling and Catastrophizing.

You predict that something negative is going to happen in the future, as if you had a Crystal Ball. Sometimes you tell yourself that the very worst thing is likely to happen, referred to as Catastrophizing.

For example, after a love relationship ends, a person could think “I’ll never find another person to love me.” Or in an upcoming job interview “They will think I am unprofessional.”

4. Disqualifying the Positive

You unreasonably tell yourself that your positive experiences, deeds or qualities do not count.

This thinking error is very common in individuals with low self esteem or social anxiety. They easily say that it is some outside force that has nothing to do with them that gets credit for a positive event or interaction.

5. Should Statements.

We have a list of ironclad rules about how others and we should behave and you overestimate how bad it is that these expectations are not met. People who break the rules make us angry, and we feel guilty when we violate these rules. A person may often believe they are trying to motivate themselves with shoulds and shouldn’ts, as if they have to be punished before they can do anything.

For example, “I really should exercise. I shouldn’t be so lazy.” *Musts* and *oughts* are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When a person directs *should statements* toward others, they often feel anger, frustration and resentment.

6. Emotional Reasoning aka Feelings aren’t Facts.

We believe that what we feel must be true automatically. If we feel stupid and boring, then we must be stupid and boring. You assume that your unhealthy emotions reflect the way things really are — “I feel it, therefore it must be true.”

7. Overgeneralization/Labeling.

We generalize one or two qualities into a negative global judgment. These are extreme forms of generalizing, and are also referred to as “labeling” and “mislabeling.” Instead of describing an error in context of a specific situation, a person will attach an unhealthy label to themselves.

For example, they may say, “I’m a loser” in a situation where they failed at a specific task. When someone else’s behavior rubs a person the wrong way, they may attach an unhealthy label to him, such as “He’s a real jerk.” Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded. For example, instead of saying someone drops her children off at daycare every day, a person who is mislabeling might say that “she abandons her children to strangers.”

8. Mind Reading

You believe you know what others are thinking, failing to consider, more likely, possibilities and you don't make an effort to check it out.

9. Unproductive and Unhelpful Thoughts

These are not illogical thoughts like the others. These are just thoughts that may have truth to them or are value judgments that are not true or false - but that are not helpful to you. For example: "It's not fair that I have anxiety, I've never had to ask anyone out before, working on these issues is hard". Thinking these thoughts repeatedly will only make you feel anxious or depressed but are not helpful so still need to be challenged somewhat – even if the challenge is simple acceptance in these cases.