

15 Common Cognitive Distortions

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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. Polarized 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. Overgeneralization.

We come to a general conclusion based on a single incident or piece of evidence. If something bad happens once, we expect it to happen over and over again. A person may see a single, unpleasant event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.

4. Jumping to Conclusions.

Without individuals saying so, we know what they are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, we are able to determine how people are feeling toward us. For example, a person may conclude

that someone is reacting negatively toward them and don't actually bother to find out if they are correct. Another example is a person may anticipate that things will turn out badly, and will feel convinced that their prediction is already an established fact.

5. Catastrophizing.

We expect disaster to strike, no matter what. This is also referred to as “magnifying or minimizing.” We hear about a problem and use *what if* questions (e.g., “What if tragedy strikes?” “What if it happens to me?”).

For example, a person might exaggerate the importance of insignificant events (such as their mistake, or someone else's achievement). Or they may inappropriately shrink the magnitude of significant events until they appear tiny (for example, a person's own desirable qualities or someone else's imperfections).

6. Personalization.

Thinking that everything people do or say is some kind of reaction to us. We also compare ourselves to others trying to determine who is smarter, better looking, etc. A person sees themselves as the cause of some unhealthy external event that they were not responsible for. For example, “We were late to the dinner party and *caused* the hostess to overcook the meal. If I had only pushed my husband to leave on time, this wouldn't have happened.”

7. Control Fallacies.

If we feel *externally controlled*, we see ourselves as helpless a victim of fate. For example, “I can't help it if the quality of the work is poor, my boss demanded I work overtime on it.” The fallacy of *internal control* has us assuming responsibility for the pain and happiness of everyone around us. For example, “Why aren't you happy? Is it because of something I did?”

8. Fallacy of Fairness.

We feel resentful because we think we know what is fair, but other people won't agree with us. As our parents tell us, “Life is always fair,” and people who go through life applying a measuring ruler against every situation judging its “fairness” will often feel badly and negative because of it.

9. Blaming.

We hold other people responsible for our pain, or take the other track and blame ourselves for every problem. For example, “Stop making me feel bad about myself!” Nobody can “make” us feel any particular way — only we have control over our own emotions and emotional reactions.

10. Shoulds.

We have a list of ironclad rules about how others and we should behave. 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.

11. Emotional Reasoning.

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.”

12. Fallacy of Change.

We expect that other people will change to suit us if we just pressure or cajole them enough. We need to change people because our hopes for happiness seem to depend entirely on them.

13. Global 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.”

14. Always Being Right.

We are continually on trial to prove that our opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and we will go to any length to demonstrate our rightness. For example, “I don’t care how badly arguing with me makes you feel, I’m going to win this argument no matter what because I’m right.” Being right often is more important than the feelings of others around a person who engages in this cognitive distortion, even loved ones.

15. Heaven’s Reward Fallacy.

We expect our sacrifice and self-denial to pay off, as if someone is keeping score. We feel bitter when the reward doesn’t come.

So now that you know what cognitive distortions are, how do you go about undoing them? Read how in *Fixing Cognitive Distortions*. (Below)

References:

Beck, A. T. (1976). *Cognitive therapies and emotional disorders*. New York: New American Library.

Burns, D. D. (1980). *Feeling good: The new mood therapy*. New York: New American Library.

Fixing Cognitive Distortions

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Cognitive distortions have a way of playing havoc with our lives. If we let them. This kind of “stinkin’ thinkin’” can be “undone,” but it takes effort and lots of practice — every day. If you want to stop the irrational thinking, you can start by trying out the exercises below.

1. Identify Our Cognitive Distortion.

We need to create a list of our troublesome thoughts and examine them later for matches with a list of cognitive distortions. An examination of our cognitive distortions allows us to see which distortions we prefer. Additionally, this process will allow us to think about our problem or predicament in more natural and realistic ways.

2. Examine the Evidence.

A thorough examination of an experience allows us to identify the basis for our distorted thoughts. If we are quite self-critical, then, we should identify a number of experiences and situations where we had success.

3. Double Standard Method.

An alternative to “self-talk” that is harsh and demeaning is to talk to ourselves in the same compassionate and caring way that we would talk with a friend in a similar situation.

4. Thinking in Shades of Gray.

Instead of thinking about our problem or predicament in an either-or polarity, evaluate things on a scale of 0-100. When a plan or goal is not fully realized, think about and evaluate the experience as a partial success, again, on a scale of 0-100.

5. Survey Method.

We need to seek the opinions of others regarding whether our thoughts and attitudes are realistic. If we believe that our anxiety about an upcoming event is unwarranted, check with a few trusted friends or relatives.

6. Definitions.

What does it mean to define ourselves as “inferior,” “a loser,” “a fool,” or “abnormal.” An examination of these and other global labels likely will reveal that they more closely represent specific behaviors, or an identifiable behavior pattern instead of the total person.

7. Re-attribution.

Often, we automatically blame ourselves for the problems and predicaments we experience. Identify external factors and other individuals that contributed to the problem. Regardless of the degree of

responsibility we assume, our energy is best utilized in the pursuit of resolutions to problems or identifying ways to cope with predicaments.

8. Cost-Benefit Analysis.

It is helpful to list the advantages and disadvantages of feelings, thoughts, or behaviors. A cost-benefit analysis will help us to ascertain what we are gaining from feeling bad, distorted thinking, and inappropriate behavior. Note: 1) clinical concept of secondary gain; and 2) refer to cost-benefit analysis.

Reference:

Burns, D.D. (1989). *The feeling good handbook: Using the new mood therapy in everyday life*. New York: William Morrow.