

## Definitions of Cognitive Distortions

A cognition is a “thought.” A cognitive distortion is a thought that is slightly out of alignment with reality in some way. Cognitive distortions are simply ways that our mind convinces us of something that is not really true. These inaccurate thoughts are usually used to reinforce negative thinking or emotions - telling ourselves things that sound rational and accurate, but only serve to keep us feeling bad about ourselves.

1. **ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING:** You see things in black and white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect; you see yourself as a total failure. Someone either loves you or they don't. They either trust you completely or not at all. I either succeeded or I failed. The distorted part of this one is taking these that are dimensional or a matter-of-degree and forcing it into two categories. 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.

2. **OVERGENERALIZATION:** You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.

3. **MENTAL FILTER:** You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors the entire beaker of water.

4. **DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE:** You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or other. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.

5. **JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS:** You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusions.

*Mind Reading.* You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you do not bother to check this out. The distortion here is that we are unable to actually read minds. We guess and are often wrong when we do.

*The FortuneTeller Error.* You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already established fact. The distortion here is that we don't know the future with any certainty.

6. **MAGNIFICATION (CATASTROPHIZING) OR MINIMIZATION:** You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up or someone else's achievement). Or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other person's imperfections). This is also called the "binocular trick."

7. **EMOTIONAL REASONING:** You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are. 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."

8. **SHOULD STATEMENTS:** 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. You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn'ts, as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. "Musts" and "oughts" are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should-statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.

9. **LABELING AND MISLABELING:** This is an extreme form of over-generalization. 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."

10. **PERSONALIZATION:** You see yourself as the cause of some negative event which in fact, you were not primarily responsible for. You imagine that you are the sole reason why other people do what they do. Thinking that everything people do or say is 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."

11. **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?"

12. **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 isn't 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.

13. **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.

14. **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 changing.

15. **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.

16. **HEAVEN'S REWARD FALLACY:** We expect our sacrifice and self-denial to payoff, as if someone is keeping score. We feel bitter when the reward doesn't come.

### **TOOLS FOR CORRECTING COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS**

***Identify Our Cognitive Distortion.*** (3 Column Technique). First capture the stream of thoughts you are having by writing them down. Then examine if any of the thoughts match any of the distortions above. Finally, attempt to rephrase how you are thinking; saying what you want to say, but without the cognitive distortion. Over time you will learn that each of the distortions has various ways confronting and correcting it.

***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.

***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.

***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. If an event is negative, score it on a scale of 0-100. Add other events on the scale to allow for calibration and perspective.

***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.

***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.

***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.

***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.

***Getting Comfortable with “Don’t Know.”*** Some cognitive distortions are a result of taking something that is an unknown (e.g., what someone else is thinking or how the future will unfold) and thinking as if we know the unknown. We want to replace this tendency to fill in the blank with a “story” and replace it with “don’t know.” Why is he acting that way? “Don’t know.” How is the meeting going to turn out? “Don’t know.”