

## COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

Cognitive distortions are often errors in logic or reasoning. These ‘twisted’ forms of thinking can lead to maladaptive consequences in mood, behaviour, self-image, and interpersonal relationships.

### **Commonly observed cognitive distortions:**

- **All-or-nothing thinking:** also known as dichotomous thinking. Things are seen as black or white, with no shades of gray in between. For example, believing that you need to be perfect all the time or you will be a complete failure.
- **Overgeneralization:** a single specific negative event is viewed as a never-ending pattern characteristic of life in general. For example, a careless remark by your partner is seen as he or she doesn’t care for you despite having showed considerations on other occasions.
- **Mental filter:** also known as selective abstraction, where a single negative detail is picked out and dwelled on exclusively. One aspect of a complex situation is the sole focus of attention. For example, focusing on one negative comment in an overall evaluation while ignoring the positive comments.
- **Disqualifying the positive:** positive experiences that would contradict with the individual’s negative views or outlooks are discarded by declaring that ‘they don’t count’. For example, seeing positive feedback from friends and family as ‘they’re only saying it to be nice’.
- **Jumping to conclusions:** making a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that support your conclusions. This can take the forms of:
  - **Mind reading:** arbitrarily conclude that somebody is reacting negatively to you, and not bothering to find evidence to support your conclusions.
  - **Fortune-teller error:** anticipate things will turn out badly, and feeling so convinced that you become your own self-fulfilling prophecy.
- **Magnification/Minimization:** exaggerate the importance of things (e.g., meaning of someone else’s achievements), or inappropriately shrink or minimize qualities (e.g., imperfections in others, or good qualities within yourself).
- **Catastrophizing:** attributing extreme and horrible consequences to the outcomes of events. Negative events are treated as intolerable catastrophes. For example, thinking a simple mistake at work would result in being dismissed from your current job and being unable to find future employment.
- **Emotional reasoning:** assuming that negative emotions necessarily reflect the reality of the way things are. For example, deciding a future prospect is hopeless and gives up trying simply because you feel hopeless.
- **“Should” statements:** these statements are used to motivate yourself or control your own behaviour. However, they may set you up with unrealistic expectations, leaving you to feel guilty. When directed at others, ‘should’ statements could lead to feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment. For example, thinking ‘I should

not feel angry, she is my mother and I have to listen to her', and feeling guilty when you do not listen.

- **Labeling and mislabeling:** this is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Labeling is attaching a global label to one self rather than recognizing there are specific and subjective events or actions. For example, thinking 'I'm a failure in life!' rather than 'Boy, I really blew that one test'.
- **Personalization:** assumption or perception of negative events as indicative of some negative characteristics of yourself, or taking responsibility for events or outcomes that are not your doing. For example, assuming a supervisor's lack of friendliness today is a reflection of his feelings towards you, rather than seeing that it could have been due to a rough night's sleep.

### How to combat or reframe negative and distorted thinking:

- **Identify the distortions:** use the checklist of cognitive distortions to identify the negative and irrational thoughts you may hold.
- **Straightforward technique:** substitute a more positive and realistic thought for each of your negative thought. Ask yourself, 'is this negative thought *really* true? Do I *really* believe it? Is there another way to look at the situation?'
- **Double-standard technique:** instead of putting yourself down, talk to yourself in the same compassionate way you might to a dear friend who was upset. Ask yourself, 'would I say such harsh things to a friend with a similar problem? If not, why am I saying this to myself? What would I say to him/her instead?'
- **Examine the evidence:** instead of jumping to conclusions and assuming your negative or distorted thought to be true, examine the evidence for it. What are the facts? What do they show/indicate?
- **Assess your expectations:** are your expectations setting you up for failure, disappointment, or anger? Are they too demanding or unrealistic? Are there ways to modify your expectations so that they are more realistic and productive?
- **Cost-benefit analysis:** list the advantages and disadvantages of a negative thought or behaviour. How will this thought or behaviour help or hurt me? How does it benefit me to think this way; how does it work against me?
- **Experimental technique:** do a small experiment to test the validity of your negative thought. Ask yourself, 'How would I test this negative thought to find out if it is really valid?' How do other people think and feel about this? Could I ask some friends about this to get some feedback?
- **Reattribution:** instead of blaming yourself entirely for a problem, think about the many factors that contributed to it. Focus on solving the problem rather than blaming yourself or someone. What caused this problem? What did I contribute and what did others contribute? What can I learn from the situation?
- **Socratic method:** ask yourself several questions that will lead to the inconsistencies of your negative thoughts. Examples include 'When I say that I am a failure at life, do I mean that I fail at some things some of the time, or all things all of the time?' All human beings fail at some things, but no one fails at everything.

- **Thinking in shades of grey:** Rather than thinking about your problems in black and white categories, evaluate them in shades of gray. When things do not work out as hoped or planned, think of the experience as a partial success or learning opportunity. Pinpoint your specific errors instead of writing yourself off as a total failure.
- **Process vs. outcome:** evaluate your performance based on the process or journey, in terms of the effort you put in instead of the outcome. Your efforts are within your control, but the outcome is often not.
- **Semantic methods:** substitute language that is less colorful and emotionally loaded. Instead of thinking ‘I shouldn’t have made that mistake,’ tell yourself ‘it would be preferable if I hadn’t made that mistake’.
- **Define terms:** when you label yourself as ‘inferior’, ‘inadequate’, or a ‘loser’, ask yourself what those labels really mean. You’ll see that there is no such thing as a ‘loser’. Foolish behaviors exist, but fools and losers do no. ask you ‘what is the definition of an inferior or inadequate human being? When I say I am inadequate, what claim am I making?’
- **Be specific:** stick with reality and void judgments. For example, instead of thinking of yourself as totally defective, focus on the reality of the situation, and on your specific strengths and weaknesses instead.

