



Cognitive Distortions

¹Cognitive distortions are biased perspectives we take on ourselves and the world around us. They are irrational thoughts and beliefs that we unknowingly reinforce over time. When we have been through trauma, these distortions will be present when there is unhealed trauma. These patterns and systems of thought are often difficult to recognise when they are a part of your everyday thoughts. They can be destructive because we may not recognise that this is something that needs to change. This is an area where I have had to challenge almost every client who has come for help. We often don't realise we have these distortions and think it is normal.

Most distortions are tendencies or patterns of thinking or believing that are false or inaccurate. They often have the potential to cause psychological damage.

Common Cognitive Distortions

1. All-or-Nothing Thinking / Polarised Thinking

Also known as "Black-and-White Thinking," this manifests as an inability or unwillingness to see shades of grey. In other words, you see things in terms of extremes – something is either fantastic or terrible, and you are either perfect or a total failure.

2. Overgeneralisation

This distortion takes one instance or example and generalises it to an overall pattern. For example, a student may receive a 'C' on one test and conclude that she is stupid and a failure. Over-generalising can lead to overly negative thoughts about oneself and one's environment based on only one or two experiences.

3. Mental Filter

Similar to over-generalisation, the mental filter distortion focuses on a single negative and excludes all the positives. An example of this distortion is one partner in a romantic relationship dwelling on a single negative comment made by the other partner and viewing the relationship as hopelessly lost while ignoring the years of positive comments and experiences. The mental filter can foster a negative view of everything around you by focusing only on the negative.

4. Disqualifying the Positive

On the flip side, this distortion acknowledges positive experiences but rejects them instead of embracing them. For example, a person who receives positive feedback on something they have done rejects this and attributes it to the person just wanting to be nice to them instead of taking it as a compliment or positive evaluation of what they have done. This can be a destructive distortion since it can facilitate the continuing negative thought patterns even in the face of lots of evidence to the contrary. Things often bring about self-sabotage.

¹Ackerman, MA., C. E. (2017, September 29). *Cognitive Distortions: 22 Examples & Worksheets (& PDF)*. PositivePsychology.com. Retrieved February 25, 2022 from <https://positivepsychology.com/cognitive-distortions/>

5. Jumping to Conclusions – Mind Reading

This distortion manifests as the inaccurate belief that we know what another person is thinking. Of course, it is possible to have an idea of what other people are thinking, but this distortion refers to the negative interpretations that we jump to. Seeing a person with an unpleasant expression and jumping to the conclusion that she is thinking something negative about you is an example of this distortion.

6. Jumping to Conclusions – Fortune Telling

Fortune telling refers to the tendency to make conclusions and predictions based on little to no evidence and hold them as gospel truth. An example is a young, single woman predicting that she will never find love or have a committed and happy relationship based only on the fact that she has not found it yet. There is simply no way for her to know how her life will turn out, but she sees this prediction as fact rather than one of several possible outcomes.

7. Magnification (Catastrophising) or Minimisation

This involves exaggerating the importance or meaning of things or minimising the importance or meaning of things. An athlete who is generally a good player but makes a mistake may magnify the importance of that mistake and believe that he is a terrible teammate, while an athlete who wins a coveted award in her sport may minimise the importance of the award and continue believing that she is only a mediocre player.

8. Emotional Reasoning

All of us have bought into this distortion at one time or another. Emotional reasoning refers to the acceptance of one's emotions as fact. It can be described as "I feel it, therefore it must be true." Of course, we know this isn't a reasonable belief, but it is a common one nonetheless.

9. Should Statements

Should statements are statements that you make to yourself about what you "should" do, what you "ought" to do, or what you "must" do. They can also be applied to others, imposing a set of expectations that will likely not be met. When we hang on too tightly to our "should" statements about ourselves, the result is often guilt that we cannot live up to them. When we cling to our "should" statements about others, we are generally disappointed by the failure of others to meet our expectations, leading to anger and resentment.

10. Labeling and Mislabeled

These tendencies are basically extreme forms of over-generalisation, in which we assign judgments of value to ourselves or to others based on one instance or experience. For example, a person who labels themselves as "totally useless" for failing at something is engaging in this distortion, as is the salesperson who labels a customer "a miserable old thing" if someone fails to thank them for helping them. Mislabeled refers to the use of highly emotional, loaded language when labelling.

11. Personalisation

This involves taking everything personally or assigning blame to yourself for no logical reason to believe you are to blame. This distortion covers a wide range of situations, from assuming you are the reason a friend did not enjoy the church service you invited her to with you to the more severe examples of believing that you are the cause for every instance of moodiness or irritation in those around you.

12. Control Fallacies

A control fallacy manifests as one of two beliefs: (1) that we have no control over our lives and are helpless victims of fate, or (2) that we are in complete control of ourselves and our surroundings, giving us responsibility for the feelings of those around us. Both beliefs are damaging, and both are equally inaccurate. No one is in complete control of what happens to them, and no one has absolutely no control over their situation. Even in extreme situations where an individual seemingly has no choices in what they do, where they go, or what they say, they still have a certain amount of control over how they approach their situation mentally.

13. Fallacy of Fairness

While we would all probably prefer to operate in a world that is fair, this assumption is not based on reality and can foster negative feelings when we are faced with proof of life's unfairness. A person who judges every experience by its perceived fairness has fallen for this fallacy and will likely feel anger, resentment, and hopelessness when they inevitably encounters a situation that is not fair.

14. Fallacy of Change

Another fallacy distortion involves expecting others to change if we pressure or encourage them enough. This distortion is usually accompanied by a belief that our happiness and success rests on other people, leading us to believe that forcing those around us to change is the only way to get what we want. A man who thinks, *"If I just encourage my wife to stop doing the things that irritate me, I can be a better husband and a happier person,"* is exhibiting the fallacy of change.

15. Always Being Right

Perfectionists and those struggling with Imposter Syndrome will recognise this distortion. It is the belief that we must always be right, correct, or accurate. In this, we sometimes need to prove we are right by proving others wrong. We don't accept that we could be wrong. For example, internet trolls who spend hours arguing with each other over an opinion or political issue far beyond the point where reasonable individuals would conclude that they should "agree to disagree" are engaging in this distortion. To them, it is not simply a matter of a difference of opinion, it is an intellectual battle that must be won at all costs.

16. Heaven's Reward Fallacy

This distortion is a popular one. It is also one fuelled by movies and media. This manifests as a belief that one's struggles, one's suffering, and one's hard work will result in a just reward. It is obvious why this type of thinking is a distortion – how many examples can you think of, just within your own life and that of those around you, where hard work and sacrifice did not pay off? Sometimes, no matter how hard we work or how much we sacrifice, we will not achieve what we hope to achieve. To think otherwise is a potentially damaging pattern of thought that can result in disappointment, frustration, anger, and even depression when the awaited reward does not materialise. This is not to say that we mustn't have faith or believe that good things will come of our labours. We need to be realistic and trust in God's timing rather than have our own expectations of what something should be like.

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