

15 COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS



Cognitive distortions are thought patterns that cause you to see reality in inaccurate ways. We all have them. They usually develop as a way of coping with challenging life events. If they are reinforced often enough, they can lead to depression, anxiety, relationship problems, and other complications. The sooner you catch them, the easier they are to change! Underneath each distortion is a healthier thought you can think instead.

1. **Should statements.** You criticize yourself or other people with “shoulds” and “shouldn’ts.” “Musts” and “have-tos” are similar offenders.

“I want to. I get to. I choose to.” – Og Mandino

2. **Labeling.** You identify with your shortcomings. Instead of saying, “I made a mistake,” you tell yourself “I’m a fool” or “I’m a jerk.” An extreme form is called global labeling. This happens when you generalize one or two qualities into a global judgement of yourself or another person.

“Making mistakes is part of being human. I can learn from them!”

3. **Personalization or blame.** You blame yourself for something you weren’t entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook ways that your own attitudes and behaviors might contribute to a problem.

“Everyone makes mistakes. I can take accountability and then forgive myself and others.”

4. **Emotional reasoning.** You reason from how you feel. “If I feel that way, it must be true.” You allow your emotions to completely overtake your thoughts and reasoning.

“I will listen to my feelings and then check on the validity of the thoughts, beliefs, and interpretations that created them.”

5. **Magnification or Minimization.** You blow things way out of proportion or you shrink their importance inappropriately.

“What will this situation look like next week? Next month? Next year?”

6. **Jumping to Conclusions.** You try to read other people’s minds (you think you know other people’s thoughts and emotions and why they act the way they do) or you fortune tell (you arbitrarily predict that things will turn out a certain way).

“What are the facts in this situation? Do I know they are true?”

7. **Polarized thinking.** You look at things in black-and-white categories. You see things in extremes and use a lot of either/or thinking.

“I can look at other options before making a choice. Is there middle ground here?”

8. **Overgeneralization.** You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. You come to conclusions based off of a single piece of evidence.

“There are lots of ways to look at things. What is a positive thing that could come out of this situation?”

9. **Filtering.** You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives. You might pick one negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so it distorts your vision of reality.

“What am I grateful for right now? What is something positive that has happened?”

10. **Discounting the positives.** You insist that your positive qualities or accomplishments “don’t count.”

“I have worth and I can contribute to the world.”

11. **Personalization.** You assume that the things other people do are because of you. You take things personally when they aren’t, frequently compare yourself to others, and see yourself as the cause of things you weren’t responsible for.

“Other people are responsible for their thoughts, emotions and actions. I am only responsible for mine.”

12. **Control fallacies.** You either see yourself as a victim of fate (“I didn’t get a good grade because my teacher hates me”) or you assume responsibility for the emotions of people around you (“are you unhappy because of something I did?”)

“Other people don’t have to like me. That’s my job.”

13. **Fallacy of fairness.** You feel resentful because you know what is fair and other people don’t agree with you.

“Equity is not the same equality. I have everything I need.”

14. **Always being right.** You continually put others on trial to prove you are correct. You will go to ANY length to demonstrate how you are correct and other people are wrong.

“I don’t have to be right to have value.”

15. **Catastrophizing.** When something is unknown, you jump to negative instead of positive. You automatically assume the worst will happen. An example could be, “If my boyfriend breaks up with me I will never find anyone else and I will be alone forever!”

“I can prepare for all possibilities while hoping for the best.”