

16 Common Cognitive Distortions

We tend to have automatic negative thoughts during a stressful situation or afterwards. By recognizing the cognitive distortion, we can challenge the negative thought and change it. In the blue text below are the positive healthy thoughts.



1. Assuming/Mind-Reading

Believing that you know what other people are thinking and conclude that they are reacting negatively to you, and you don't bother to verify if it is true. For example, you think someone is mad at you because they walked in and didn't speak to you.

Am I assuming I know what they are thinking? What's the evidence? Those are my own thoughts, not theirs. Maybe they are having a bad day. Is there a more balanced way of understanding the situation?

2. Over-Generalization

Seeing a single negative event as a never-ending pattern. You feel hopeless or predict negative consequences from small setbacks. For example, you go on one bad date and think "No one will marry me," or get a bad grade on a test and think "I'm never going to graduate."

Let's look at the totally of the situation. Has this happened before? What have I learned? What are some positive aspects from the situation?



3. Should & Musts

Using phrases like "I should," "I shouldn't," or "I must" creates self-imposed pressure and sets unrealistic expectations for ourselves. The emotional consequence is guilt. When "should" statements are directed at others, they often trigger feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment.

Am I placing unnecessary pressure on myself or setting expectations that are nearly impossible to meet? What would be a more realistic approach?



4. Mental Filter

When you notice only what the filter allows or wants you to notice, and you dismiss anything that doesn't fit. You pick out a single negative aspect and dwell on it exclusively. For example, you focus on the one missed shot in the basketball game, but dismiss all the made shots and good play.

Am I only noticing the bad stuff? Note the positive aspects. Am I just wearing those "gloomy spectacles"? What would be more realistic?

5. Black & White Thinking

Believing that everything is all or nothing that something or someone can be only good or bad, right or wrong, rather than anything in-between or "shades of grey" - seeing things in extremes. For example, believing that anyone who disagrees with your political view is evil.

Things aren't either totally one way or another - most things fall within the middle ground. Everything has nuances and complexities. No one is perfect. No project is completed without some errors. Where is this on the spectrum?



6. Fairy Tale Fantasy

Idealize what things should be like and when it doesn't happen, we get upset. For example, you plan a trip with your family, but when you go on it, some of your family members are not as excited as you about certain outings, and so you get frustrated.



What are some realistic expectations for this project or event? Everyone may not feel the same way about things as I do. Nothing works out exactly how you want it to. I need to always expect contingencies.

7. Fortuneteller/Prediction



Believing we know what's going to happen in the future. Expecting negative outcomes and treating those predictions as if they are already proven facts. For example, you go to a conference thinking it will be a waste of time, but actually it is entertaining and you learn a lot.

Am I assuming I can foresee the future? And how likely is it that this is actually true? Do I really have all the information to determine what will happen?



8. Personalization

Taking responsibility for things out of one's control. If I had not wore those creaky shoes, then the grouchy greeter at Wal-Mart would've smiled at me.

I can't control other people's emotions and behaviors, only they can.

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9. Catastrophizing

Assuming the worst-case outcome will occur. Imagining and accepting the worst scenario as inevitable. For example, you worry a minor mistake at work will lead to losing your job or a stomach ache is cancer.

Expecting the worst isn't productive right now. What outcome is actually most likely? Believing the worst will happen isn't helping me in this moment.

10. Magnification/Minimization

Distorting the significance of things by making them seem far bigger or smaller than they really are—amplifying negatives while downplaying positives.

“Making mountains out of molehills.” For example, “I forgot a line in the play - I must be the worst actor. They offered me a leading role in the next play - they just feel sorry for me.”

Am I magnifying the negatives or being overly self-critical? How might someone else view this? What's the broader context?



11. Critical Self

Putting ourselves down, engaging in self-criticism, and taking excessive responsibility for events or situations that aren't entirely our fault. For example, “our company weren't awarded the contract because I chose the font that was not sophisticated enough.”

My inner critic is showing up again. Would a fair observer who knows me say this? Am I taking responsibility for more than is reasonable?



12. Emotional Reasoning

Treating negative, emotional reactions as factual evidence about how things truly are - meaning if I feel it, then it must be true. For example, “I feel anxious, so I must be in danger.”

Feelings aren't facts; they're reactions to automatic thoughts. Just because something feels bad doesn't mean it actually is.



13. Judgments

Judging events, ourselves, others, or the world instead of sticking to observable facts and evidence. A severe form of overgeneralization characterized by emotionally charged and dramatic language. For example, you see a minority couple dressed roughly talking seriously at dinner and judge that they are poor, dumb, and struggling in their relationship.

I'm evaluating this situation or person to make sense of things, but that doesn't mean my judgment is always accurate or helpful. What other perspective could I consider?



14. Compare & Despair

Focusing exclusively on others' positive qualities while judging ourselves negatively in comparison. Putting others on a pedestal and ourselves down. For example, looking at someone's family beach trip photos on social media



and thinking that they have the perfect vacation compared to yours where you focus on the rainy weather.

Am I measuring myself against others in a way that's unkind or unrealistic? What's a more balanced perspective?

15. Memories

Current events may trigger traumatic memories, leading the nervous system to react as if the threat is happening now rather than in the past, making past danger feel immediate and real. For example, at 7 years old you were looking at a neon red sign when your dog was ran over



by a car, and now red neon signs bring back that feeling of loss.

This is a reminder from the past, not something happening now. That was then; this is now. Even though the memory is upsetting, it isn't happening again.



16. Labeling

Assigning negative labels to oneself or others. For example, “if you don't go to college, then you are dumb.”

Am I being too harsh upon myself and others? Do I need to consider each person's uniqueness?