

COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS, THINKING ERRORS & MIND TRAPS

Cognitive Therapy is based on the idea that at times, we all fall into illogical patterns of thinking which can make us unhappy. Here are the most common thinking traps that have been identified. When we begin to think in these ways, it is as though we wear blinders or dark glasses which prevent us from seeing other explanations or possibilities. We limit ourselves with these thoughts and make ourselves more miserable than is actually warranted by the facts of a situation. Learning how to examine our thoughts and avoiding the traps, greatly improves our overall mood.

1. **All or Nothing Thinking:** This refers to the tendency to evaluate things in black-or-white categories. Things around us have to be perfect or they aren't good enough. We have to be perfect or we aren't good enough. This thinking habit causes us to fear any mistake or imperfection because we will then see ourselves as inadequate, hopeless or worthless. This is unrealistic because life is rarely "black & white". No one, for example, is absolutely brilliant or totally stupid, completely attractive or totally ugly. There are instead, many degrees of intelligence or attractiveness. When our expectations are exaggerated we will never be able to measure up to them and neither will anyone else.
2. **Overgeneralization:** When we Overgeneralize, we assume that something that happened before, will occur or is occurring over and over again. If what happened was unpleasant, then we feel upset as we think of this endlessly being repeated. When you hear yourself say "He always . . ." or "She never . . ." you are Overgeneralizing. Other key words are "nobody, everybody, all or none". This is a thinking error because when it comes to behavior, human beings are inconsistent. It's impossible to "always be right" or "never have a hair out of place".
3. **Mental Filter:** We pick out a negative detail in any situation and focus on it while remaining blind to the positive or neutral points. When we are depressed, we wear a pair of dark glasses that filter out anything positive. All that we allow to enter our conscious mind is negative. Because we are not aware of this "filtering process", we conclude that everything is negative. It's a bad habit that makes us miserable. The truth is that life is a mix of positive and negative things. We can see the glass as half empty or half full.
4. **Disqualifying the Positive:** This means the persistent tendency to transform neutral or even positive experiences into negative ones. We don't just ignore positive experiences, we cleverly and swiftly turn them into their nightmarish opposite. Whenever someone compliments us, we say something like "They were just being nice." If something good happens we tell ourselves it was just a fluke or it doesn't count. We look for something wrong with the situation, no matter how small then use it to discredit the entire experience.
5. **Jumping to Conclusions:** Jumping to a negative conclusion that is not justified by the facts of the situation.
 - a. **Mind Reading:** We make an assumption about what others are thinking or feeling without checking it out. We may not even believe them when they tell us what they are really thinking or feeling because we are so convinced of our own version.
 - b. **Fortune Telling:** Also known as "catastrophizing" or "awfulizing", we anticipate that things will turn out badly and we feel convinced that our prediction is already a reality. This can lead to high levels of anxiety. We expect disaster. We think "What if this or that happens?" We scare ourselves with possibilities that are unlikely to occur. Then we think of how awful we would feel.
6. **Magnification and Minimization:** We blow things out of proportion or shrink them, otherwise known as the binocular trick. When we look at our own errors, fears and

imperfections they appear gigantic. But we reverse the binoculars when we think about our strengths and accomplishments so they look small and unimportant. Sometimes we do this to others, magnifying their imperfections and thereby justify being angry at them.

7. **Emotional Reasoning:** We take our emotions as evidence of the truth. But feelings don't equal "TRUTH", they are just feelings. Often however, if we feel something strongly then we believe that it is true. For example: "I feel overwhelmed and hopeless therefore my problems must be impossible to solve". It doesn't occur to us that feelings are like colored glasses which change how things look to us but have no actual effect on the scenery.
8. **Should Statements:** The problem with Should Statements is that we are forever extending them beyond the basic "shoulds" that most of us agree upon (you shouldn't kill anybody, steal, lie etc.) to include those things we have personal preference for. For example: "I should get up early every morning" or "He should know what I want." Too often we use "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts" to beat ourselves or others over the head and the result is shame, anger or guilt. It is important to remember that "shoulds" are not laws written in stone but merely our own beliefs and preferences. Sometimes they are the beliefs and preferences of our parents, our spouse or our culture which we are trying to hold ourselves to. When you hear yourself say "I should . . ." try to substitute "I want . . ." instead and see if it fits. If not, then readjust your efforts toward something you do want.
9. **Labeling and Mislabeling:** This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. It occurs when we describe ourselves in negative terms instead of describing our behavior. For example: someone might say "I'm an idiot" instead of saying "I got a D on my math test" or "He's an insensitive jerk" instead of "He interrupted me". Labeling ourselves or others is not only self defeating, it's irrational. A person's "self" cannot be defined by any one thing he or she does. A person's life is a complex and ever changing flow of thoughts, emotions and actions. We aren't statues or paintings forever frozen in one quality or mistake.
10. **Personalization and Blame:** We assume responsibility for events or people when there is no basis for doing so. We conclude that what happened was our fault or reflects our inadequacy, even when we were not responsible for it. When a mother saw her child's report card, there was a note from the teacher indicating the child was not working well. She immediately decided, "I must be a bad mother. This shows how I've failed." This mother is confusing influence with control over others. Everyone influences the people they interact with, but no one could reasonably expect to completely control the behavior or performance of others. On the other hand we may blame people or circumstances for things over which we do have some control or influence. When we feel others are entirely at fault, we feel powerless and hopeless to use problem solving skills or to look at our own part in the situation.
11. **Fairness Fallacy:** We become upset because we see something or someone as being unfair to us or others. The problem is that not only is life not fair, there are no universal fairness laws among people either. Each person makes assumptions about what is fair based on what is important to him or her. What seems unfair to one seems perfectly fair to someone else. If we expect everyone else to follow our own laws of fairness, we will be continually disappointed, upset and angry.

Adapted from: Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy by David Burns, MD and Thoughts and Feelings: the Art of Cognitive Stress Intervention by McKay, Davis and Fanning.