



Malissa Page
Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Inc.

MalissaPage.com

Live an Empowered life!



The 10 Cognitive Distortions in CBT

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a well known evidenced-based therapy that helps us recognize unhelpful ways of thinking; and how to restructure our thoughts.

We all experience thought distortions. When we're struggling with depression, anxiety and insecurities our minds tend to generate more thought distortions. CBT teaches us how to recognize when we experience a thought distortion, and gives us a set of tools on how to restructure them into a more realistic thought. Understanding the basics of CBT is a valuable life skill. The first place to start is getting familiar with the 10 Cognitive Distortions.

Cognitive distortion is a psychological term that describes inaccurate troublesome thoughts. The word cognitive refers to thinking, so these can also be called thought distortions. Think of cognitive distortions as being a distorted view of the situation. They often resemble an accurate portrayal of the situation, so that's why we get tricked into thinking they are fact.

When you're first learning about the 10 cognitive distortions you're likely to identify with having experienced several or even all of them. After you become familiar with them you'll notice your mind likes to gravitate towards few of them more than others. When you become fluent in the 10 cognitive distortions and as you build more self-awareness you'll be able to notice them in real time. Soon you'll be telling yourself, "*Ahh! I'm doing that all or nothing way of thinking again.*" This allows you to gain a more realistic perspective in the moment. *That's empowerment!*

The 10 Cognitive Distortions in CBT

All-or-Nothing Thinking: You see things in black-or-white categories. If a situation falls short of perfect, you see it as a total failure. A student performs poorly on their first exam and thinks "I'm going to fail this class."

Over generalization: You see a single negative event, such as a romantic rejection or a career reversal, as a never-ending pattern of defeat by using words such as "always" or "never" when you think about it. A depressed salesman became terribly upset when he noticed bird dung on the windshield of his car. He told himself, "Just my luck! Birds are always crapping on my car!"

Mental Filter: You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively, so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors a beaker of water. Example: You receive many positive comments about your presentation to a group of associates at work, but one of them says something mildly critical. You obsess about this reaction for days and ignore all the positive feedback.

Discounting the Positive: You reject positive experiences by insisting they don't count. If you do a good job, you may tell yourself that it wasn't good enough, or that anyone could have done as well. Discounting the positive takes the joy out of life and makes you feel inadequate and unrewarded.

Jumping to Conclusions: You interpret things negatively when there's no facts to support your conclusion. **Mind reading:** Without checking it out, you arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you. **Fortune-telling:** You predict that things will turn out badly. Before a test you may tell yourself, "I'm really going to blow it. What if I fail?" If you're depressed you might tell yourself, "I'll never feel better."

Magnification: You exaggerate the importance of your problems and shortcomings, or you minimize the importance of your desirable qualities. This is also called the "binocular trick."

Emotional Reasoning: You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel terrified about going on airplanes. It must be very dangerous to fly." Or "I feel guilty. I must be a rotten person". Or "I feel angry. This proves I'm being treated unfairly." Or "I feel so inferior. This means I'm a second-rate person." Or "I feel hopeless. I must really be hopeless."

"Should statements": You tell yourself that things should be the way you hoped or expected them to be. After playing a difficult piece on the piano, a gifted pianist told herself, "I shouldn't have made so many mistakes." This made her feel so disgusted that she quit practicing for several days. **"Musts," "oughts" and "have tos"** are similar offenders. **"Should statements"** that are directed against yourself lead to guilt and frustration. Should statements that are directed against other people or the world in general lead to anger and frustration: "He shouldn't be so stubborn and argumentative?" Many people try to motivate themselves with should and shouldn't, as if they had to be punished before they could be expected to do anything. "I shouldn't eat that doughnut" This usually doesn't work because all these should and musts make you feel rebellious and you get the urge to do just the opposite.

Labeling: Labeling is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. Instead of saying "I made a mistake," you attach a negative label to yourself like, "I'm a loser." You might also label yourself "a fool" or "a failure" or "not capable." Labeling is quite irrational because you are not the same as what you do. *Continued on next page*

Human beings exist, but “fools,” and “losers” do not. These labels are just useless abstractions that lead to anger, anxiety, frustration, and low self-esteem. You may also label others. When someone does something that rubs you the wrong way, you may tell yourself: “They are a jerk (*or your favorite expletive*). Then you feel that the problem is with that person’s “character” or “essence” instead of with their thinking or behavior. You see them as totally bad. This makes you feel hostile and hopeless about improving things and leaves little room for constructive communication.

Personalization and blame: Personalization occurs when you hold yourself personally responsible for an event that isn’t entirely under your control. When a woman received a note that her child was having difficulties at school, she told herself, “This shows what a bad mother I am,” instead of trying to pinpoint the cause of the problem, so that she could be helpful to her child. A woman's significant other cheated she told herself, “If only I were better in bed, they wouldn’t have cheated.” Personalization leads to guilt, shame, and feelings of inadequacy. Some people do the opposite. They blame other people, or their circumstances for their problems, and they overlook ways that they might be contributing to the problem. For example, “The reason why I don’t have a job is because nobody takes resumes in person anymore.” Blame usually doesn’t work very well because other people will resent being a scapegoat and they will just toss the blame right back in your lap. It’s like the game of hot potato – no one wants to get stuck with it.

Source: Harper Collins Publishers, Burns D. (1989). *The Feeling Good Handbook*. Harper Collins Publishers, New York.

Tips for learning the 10 distortions



Accept that cognitive distortions are part of our human condition, and nothing to be shameful about.



Be patient with yourself when learning how to identify and restructure cognitive distortions. Being able to identify and restructure a distorted thought is a skill that takes time to develop.



Learning the 10 cognitive distortions is similar to learning a new language. Becoming fluent in them takes practice and familiarity.



Dedicate time (at least every few days) to re-read the 10 cognitive distortions and try to identify a recent situation when your mind generated one.