



22 Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive Distortions are biased and irrational ways of thinking and perceiving which can negatively influence our emotional states, decrease motivation, increase anxiety, and lead to depression and substance abuse.

1. **All or nothing thinking** – thinking things are black or white, win or lose, success or failure, without recognizing shades of gray, nuances, or complexities.
2. **Probability overestimations** – the tendency of overestimating the likelihood of a negative outcome or occurrence.
3. **Overgeneralizations** – extrapolating a single or few incidents into a generalized truth: typical words include always, everyone, never, every, and nobody.
4. **Polarizing / Splitting** - not bringing together the contrasting positive and negative qualities into a perhaps complex yet realistic whole, focusing on only one aspect. This is often seen as “either / or” thinking versus a more inclusive and solutions-focused “and”.
5. **Stuck in a Role** – the tendency to see yourself in only one role (victim, martyr, savior, hero, villain, jokester, creative) instead of being able to assume roles based on the situation and need.
6. **Mental Filter** – filtering out positives and focusing only on the negative (you get 8 compliments and one critique and you only focus on the critique).
7. **Disqualifying the Positive** – the failure to recognize a positive, such as a compliment, by diminishing it (it was on sale, I was just lucky), or believing the person was not truthful in their compliment.
8. **Jumping to Conclusions** – reaching conclusions (usually negative) without evidence.
9. **Mind Reading** – assuming you know what another person is thinking.
10. **Fortune Telling** – predicting events in the future, usually negative.
11. **Magnification** – making something bigger or more prevalent than it really is (usually a weakness of oneself, or a strength of someone else, or length of time – “I could never be in their league”, “This will never end”).
12. **Catastrophizing** – thinking that something will become or end in a pervasive and catastrophic way.
13. **Minimization** – perceiving a strength or positive character trait as less than it is.



14. **Emotional Reasoning** – thinking that because you feel something and experience an emotion, that means that it is true despite evidence to the contrary. A sense that your feelings equal reality.
15. **Shoulding** – a set of rules about how you believe you ought to behave or perform, often based on social pressures: “I should always know the answer”, “I should never have an off day”, “I should always win”, “I should always be busy”, “I should never take a break”.
16. **Personalization** – blaming oneself for issues or events that had nothing to do with you (people’s moods, bad luck).
17. **Forgetting** – the tendency to forget about resources (skills, experiences, abilities) that you have access to.
18. **Labeling** – assigning a fixed assessment to something or someone (even oneself) after limited exposure or experience (“I’m a screw up”).
19. **Fallacy of Fairness** – believing that things should always work out for you based on fairness and equality.
20. **Control Fallacies** – extreme of feeling that everything that happens to you is totally out of your control, or totally up to you.
21. **Fundamental Attribution Error** – assuming someone’s behavior is due to their character rather than influenced by the circumstance. We tend to view the behavior of someone we like, know, or who we see as similar to us through a circumstantial lens (and give them the benefit of the doubt), whereas we are more likely when committing a fundamental attribution error to assign a behavior to one’s character.
22. **Confirmation Bias** – focusing narrowly on behaviors which reinforce your belief and expectation. As a result, we have scotoma – we see what we want to see and believe.

Reflect on these 22 cognitive distortions. Which have you used in the past? Do you have a “go-to”? Are there any differences between what you might use for different situations (say work versus a personal relationship)?



Day 1

Write down any issues that bothered you today. Write down the emotions you experienced from that issue. Notice if you used any of the cognitive distortions. Jot down which ones, and what the topic was.



Day 2

What is evidence that would counter the cognitive distortions you noted in Day 2? Write down positive experiences in the past, or other meanings for your thoughts.

Day 3



What were the actions that happened in Day 2?

What cognitive distortions did you use?

How did those make you feel?

What counter examples could you use to offset your cognitive distortions?

What emotions would you feel instead?

How would those make you feel?

Day 4



In the last 24 hours, what situations or issues bothered you?

What cognitive distortions did you use?

How did those make you feel?

What counter examples could you use to offset your cognitive distortions?

What emotions would you feel instead?

How would those make you feel?

Day 5



In the last 24 hours, what situations or issues bothered you?

What cognitive distortions did you use?

How did those make you feel?

What counter examples could you use to offset your cognitive distortions?

What emotions would you feel instead?

How would those make you feel?

Day 6

In the last 24 hours, what situations or issues bothered you?



What cognitive distortions did you use?

How did those make you feel?

What counter examples could you use to offset your cognitive distortions?

What emotions would you feel instead?

How would those make you feel?

Day 7

In the last 24 hours, what situations or issues bothered you?



What cognitive distortions did you use?

How did those make you feel?

What counter examples could you use to offset your cognitive distortions?

What emotions would you feel instead?

How would those make you feel?