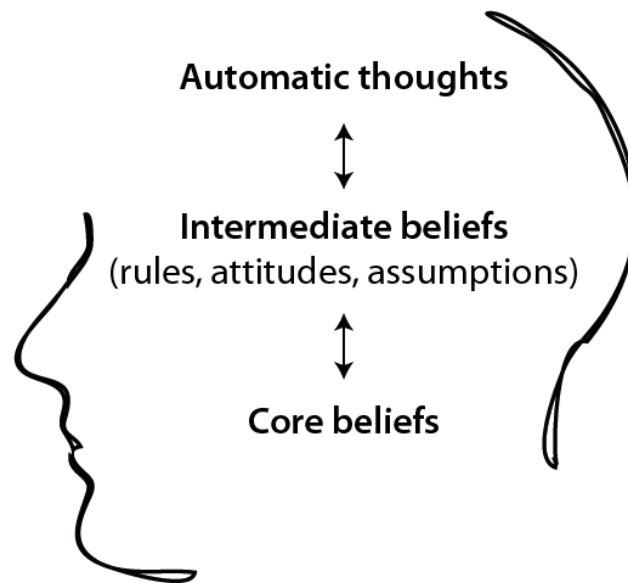




Cognitive Distortions Explained



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Cognitive distortions or 'unhelpful thinking styles' are ways that our thoughts can become biased. As conscious beings, we interpret the world around us by trying to make sense of what is happening. Sometimes our brains take 'short cuts' and generate results that are not completely accurate. Different cognitive short cuts result in different kinds of bias or distortions in our thinking. Sometimes we might jump to the worst possible conclusion, at other times we might blame ourselves for things that are not our fault. Cognitive distortions happen automatically – we don't mean to think inaccurately – but unless we learn to notice them they can have powerful yet invisible effects upon our moods and our lives. Cognitive distortions were first noted by Aaron Beck in his research with depressed



patients in the 1960's [1]. They formed a central part of his cognitive theory of depression [2] and, later, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

All-or-nothing thinking

Burns describes all-or-nothing thinking as the *"tendency to evaluate your personal qualities in extreme, black-or-white categories"* [6]. He argues that absolutes rarely exist in our universe, and that evaluating ourselves according to absolute categories or criteria is unrealistic because life simply does not work that way.

Catastrophizing

This distorted type of thinking leads people to dread or assume the worst when faced with the unknown. When people catastrophize, ordinary worries can quickly escalate. For example, an expected check doesn't arrive in the mail. A person who catastrophizes may begin to fear it will never arrive, and that as a result it won't be possible to pay rent and the whole family will be evicted.

Overgeneralization

Burn's describes overgeneralization as the process of arbitrarily concluding that *"one thing that happened to you once will occur over and over again"* [6]. Further, he argues that overgeneralization is almost entirely responsible for the pain of rejection and gives the example of being turned down on a date morphing into the conclusion *"I'll be lonely and miserable all my life"*.

Mental filter

The mental filter is described by Burns as the process of picking out a



negative detail in any situation and dwelling on it exclusively, thereby perceiving the whole situation as negative. Burns introduces the metaphor of a pair of eyeglasses with special lenses that filter out anything positive: no positive information is allowed through the filter and so you naturally draw the conclusion that everything is negative.

Disqualifying the positive

Burns describes the ability to transform neutral or even positive experiences into negative ones as a *“spectacular mental illusion”* [6]. Instead of just filtering out or ignoring positive information when it occurs it is dismissed as a ‘fluke’, or argued against (*“that doesn’t count”*). Burns gives the commonplace example that many of us engage in of disqualifying compliments by telling ourselves “they are just being nice” but also gives more extreme examples common in people suffering from depression [6].

Jumping to conclusions (mind reading, the fortune teller error)

In *Feeling Good* Burns describes jumping to conclusions as the process of *“arbitrarily jumping to a negative conclusion that is not justified by the facts”*. With the ‘mind reading’ variant we assume that other people are thinking negatively about us. With the ‘fortune telling’ variant we imagine and predict that bad things are going to happen to us. In neither case are the conclusions that we draw supported by the evidence [6]. To some extent these are natural processes – who hasn’t had the experience of thinking that a disaster has befallen a loved one who is late home from work? But taken to extremes, as is often the case in depression and anxiety, these can be extremely destructive biases.



Magnification & minimization

Magnification and minimization are described by Burns as the 'binocular trick' because of the way that errors, fears, or imperfections are exaggerated while strengths and achievements are made to seem small and unimportant. Again, Burns emphasises that this unhelpful thinking style is an involuntary habit "*the problem isn't you – it's the crazy lenses you're wearing!*" [6].

Emotional reasoning

The unhelpful thinking style of emotional reasoning is where emotions are taken as evidence of truth. Burns argues that this is backwards because your feelings reflect [are a product of] your thoughts and beliefs, and invalid because if thoughts are biased then emotions experienced as result don't correspond to the world as it is [6]. Examples of emotional reasoning include feeling hopeless and concluding that a problem is impossible to solve or feeling angry and concluding that another person is acting badly.

"Should" statements

Albert Ellis described the attempts to motivate ourselves by saying "*I should do this*" or "*I must do that*" as 'musturbation'. Burns argues that attempting to motivate ourselves in this way can, paradoxically, lead to apathetic and unmotivated feelings. Feelings of frustration are often the result of directing should statements towards others. Feelings of shame, guilt, and self-loathing are often the result when should statements are directed at ourselves.



Labeling and mislabeling

Burns argues that labeling – the process of saying to ourselves “*I am a [label]*” – is an extreme form of overgeneralization [6]. “*I am stupid*”, “*I am ugly*”, “*I am hopeless*” are all negative labels. Burns argues that labels are biased because human are fundamentally too complex to sum up by using such a simple descriptor.

Personalization and blame

Personalization is the unhelpful thinking style whereby “*You assume responsibility for a negative even when there is no basis for doing so. You arbitrarily conclude that what happened was your fault or reflects your inadequacy, even when you were not responsible for it*” [6]. Burns argues that personalization leads to inappropriate guilt, but his examples are equally consistent with strong experiences of shame. In a nice description of one component of the bias he describes how “*you have confused influence with control over others*”.

Social comparison

Comparing ourselves to other people is not inherently biased – all of us make accurate social comparisons such as “*I’m taller than him*”, or “*She’s from a different social background to me*”. However, Paul Gilbert notes that comparing ourselves unfavourably with others has been linked to many forms of personal difficulty including depression, envy and jealousy [8]. He proposes that we have an evolved propensity to make social comparisons and that although it may be possible to examine social comparisons for their rationality once they have occurred, it may be difficult to stop them from occurring in the first place. Interestingly, he notes that social comparison can be adaptive, citing Baumeister and colleagues [9] who

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suggest that “High self-esteem people socially compare to draw attention to their talents and abilities, while low self-esteem people opt for damage limitation, self-protection, and minimizing exposure of their weak points”.

The clinical implication of these observations is that we can train our clients to notice the kinds of social comparisons that they are making automatically and to get used to noticing any patterns of biases in our social comparisons: for example to notice whether we always compare ourselves unfavourably. Techniques such as mindfulness or cognitive defusion can be helpful for ‘unhooking’ from these automatic social comparisons – we can improve our mood by noticing them for what they are (automatic unhelpful thoughts) rather than ‘truths about ourselves’.

References:

Cognitive Distortions: Unhelpful Thinking Habits (Dr. M Whalley (2019)

<https://www.psychologytools.com/articles/unhelpful-thinking-styles-cognitive-distortions-in-cbt/>

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