Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions are biased, automatic thought patterns that negatively shape the way we interpret situations, ourselves and the world around us. These unhelpful thinking styles often go unnoticed, but they can have a powerful impact on our mood, behaviour and mental well-being.

It's completely normal to experience negative thoughts from time to time. However, when these patterns become frequent or deeply ingrained, they can contribute to challenges such as **anxiety, stress and depression**. Cognitive distortions can influence how we see our relationships, handle daily stress and view our own worth.

The good news? These thinking patterns are **learned**, which means they can also be **unlearned**. With awareness and practice, it's possible to challenge distorted thoughts and replace them with more balanced, helpful ways of thinking. This can support **emotional resilience**, **healthier relationships** and **greater confidence** in everyday life.

Cognitive distortions are sometimes referred to as **unhelpful thinking styles** or **faulty thinking patterns**.

Below is a list of 12 of the most common distortions, with real-life examples to help you identify them in your own thinking:

1. Disqualifying the Positive

Disqualifying the positive happens when someone **ignores, dismisses or downplays their achievements or strengths**, often attributing them to luck or external factors instead of acknowledging their own effort or ability.

Example:
"I got an A on the test, but I was just lucky - it was an easy exam."

This kind of thinking **overlooks the person's preparation and skills**. In reality, the exam may have felt easy **because they were well-prepared**, not because it lacked difficulty.

2. All-or-Nothing Thinking

(Also known as **Black-and-White Thinking**)
All-or-nothing thinking involves seeing things in **extremes**, with no middle ground. You're either a total success or a complete failure. If something isn't perfect, it's a disaster. This distortion leaves **no space for in-betweens, nuance or progress**.

Examples:

"I hate going to parties — I never have anything to say."
"Nothing ever works out for me."
"I'll always be unpopular."

This kind of thinking can be **harsh and discouraging**, often overlooking effort, growth, or partial successes. Real life usually happens in the grey areas — not at the extremes.

3. Mind Reading

*Mind reading happens when **we assume we know what someone else is thinking or feeling without checking with them**, often leading to inaccurate conclusions.*

Example:

Jas walks into the office kitchen and sees Alex staring into space. Jas says, "Good morning!"

Alex barely reacts, gives a small nod, and continues looking distracted.

Immediately, Jas thinks: "She's annoyed with me. I must've done something wrong. She's clearly giving me the cold shoulder."

But the truth inside Alex's head is actually:
"Did I remember to lock the front door this morning?" "I can't remember turning the key."
"What if something happens?"
"I can't concentrate until I check…"

This example shows how mind reading can lead to misunderstandings by filling in gaps with assumptions rather than facts.

4. Catastrophising

Catastrophising is the tendency to **assume the worst-case scenario is the most likely outcome**, or to view a situation as far worse than it really is. It's an easy trap to fall into, and it can cloud our judgement so much that we don't even realise we're doing it.

Example:
"If I make a mistake in this presentation, everyone will think I'm incompetent and I'll lose my job."

This kind of thinking magnifies fears and can increase anxiety, making it harder to stay grounded in reality and focus on manageable steps forward.
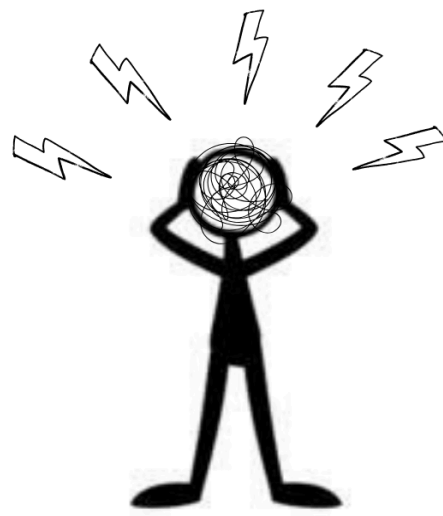
5. Labelling

Labelling is when we **generalise and judge ourselves or others by using a single word or phrase**. These labels are usually negative and simplify a complex person or situation into something unfairly critical.

Examples:
"My co-worker is always late; she's completely irresponsible." **OR** "I failed my test. I'm a loser."

Labelling ignores the bigger picture, reducing people or experiences to just one aspect, which can harm self-esteem and relationships.

6. "Should" & "Must" Statements

'Should' and 'Must' statements are what we sometimes use on ourselves when we are already feeling low or we are in a negative mind space.

Instead of being encouraging or inspiring, these statements tend to be unhelpful and weigh us down even further placing undue pressure on us.

For Example:
"I must lose weight." "People must treat me with respect." "I should be more successful."
"I should be more organised."

7. Overgeneralisation

Overgeneralisation is when someone takes **one negative event** and assumes it will happen again and again, often using words like *always*, *never* or *every time*.

It's a type of thinking error where a single incident is seen as part of a never ending pattern of failure, rejection or disappointment.

This distortion **shuts down hope** and **limits action**, because it convinces the person that things will never get better, even if the evidence doesn't support that.

For example:
"I'm terrible at interviews. I never get anything I go for. I'm just not good enough."

8. Fortune Telling

Fortune telling is a cognitive distortion where you **predict a negative outcome without considering the actual likelihood** that it will happen. It involves making assumptions about the future as if the worst case is guaranteed.

Examples:
"I'll never get the promotion I applied for, so there's no point in even trying."
"I'll never find a partner; I'll be alone forever."

This kind of thinking can limit your motivation and stop you from taking positive actions based on realistic possibilities.

9. Mental Filter

Mental filtering happens when we **focus on a single negative detail** and ignore the positive parts of a situation. It's like wearing glasses that only let in the bad stuff, distorting the full picture and making things seem worse than they really are.

Example:

"We were having a great time at the BBQ - everyone was enjoying themselves - but then it started to rain and that ruined the whole day. It was a disaster."

This way of thinking overlooks positive aspects and can make experiences feel worse than they really are.
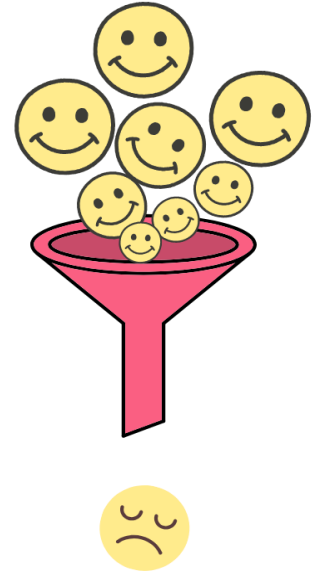
10. Emotional Reasoning

Emotional reasoning is a thought pattern where **we assume something is true based solely on how we feel**, even when there's no objective evidence to support it. Our emotions become "proof," even if they're misleading or triggered by past experiences rather than present reality.

Examples:

"I feel guilty, so I must have done something wrong."
"I feel stupid not knowing that, so I must be dumb."

This distortion can lead to unfair self-judgements and keep us stuck in negative beliefs that don't match reality.
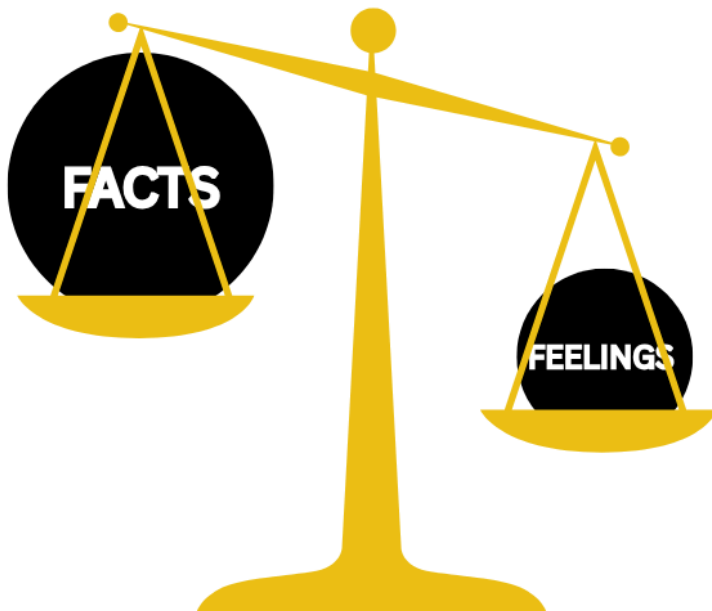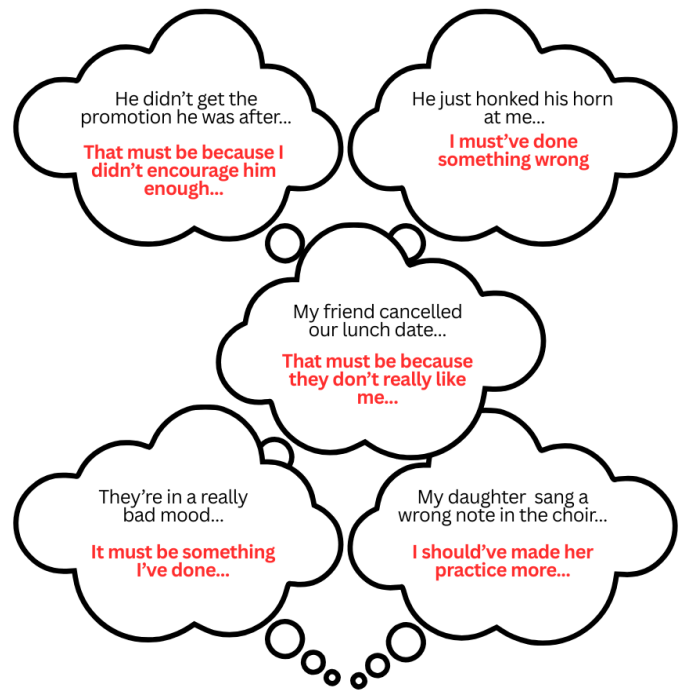
11. Personalisation

Personalisation is a cognitive distortion where we **blame ourselves for things that are outside of our control** or **assume we're the cause of something that may have nothing to do with us**. It often means taking too much responsibility for other people's moods, actions or outcomes even when there's no clear evidence we're involved.

Example:
Your child sings a wrong note in the school choir and you blame yourself for not making them practise more.

Personalisation can lead to **unnecessary guilt, anxiety or low self-worth** and often overlooks other possible explanations for what's happening.

He didn't get the promotion he was after...
That must be because I didn't encourage him enough...

He just honked his horn at me...
I must've done something wrong

My friend cancelled our lunch date...
That must be because they don't really like me...

They're in a really bad mood...
It must be something I've done...

My daughter sang a wrong note in the choir...
I should've made her practice more...

12. Magnification & Minimisation

Magnification and minimisation are two sides of a cognitive distortion that involve **misjudging the importance of events or experiences**, either by **exaggerating the negative** or **downplaying the positive.**

Magnification happens when we blow things out of proportion, especially mistakes or setbacks.

Minimisation is the opposite: we downplay or dismiss positive qualities, achievements, or feedback, often because we believe we don't deserve them.

Examples:

Magnification: "That seagull attacked me for my cornish pasty and ruined my whole day. I'll never go to the seaside again."

Minimisation: "Yes, I got good feedback, but it doesn't really count, anyone could have done that."

This distortion can seriously impact confidence and resilience, making challenges feel bigger than they are while hiding evidence of growth or success.

©Denise Richards Online Counselling 2025