

Feelings are not Facts! Identifying Cognitive Distortions: Distorted Thoughts Inventory

Just because you feel it or think it, doesn't make it true.

2 Page pdf

Check the items below to identify patterns in your thinking that may be distorted, twisted and therefore, untrue. (Adapted from David Burns MD Distorted Thoughts Inventory)

- 1. Filtering—Focus only on the negative.** *One criticism overshadows 100 compliments.*
- 2. Polarized thinking--“Black and White” or “All or Nothing” thinking.** No middle, no balance. *Always/Never. Perfect or fail. Give 100% or give up. Change everything or change nothing.*
- 3. Overgeneralizing.** *If something bad happens only once, you expect it to happen over and over again. Experience one defeat then believe the whole day, week, month, year or even your whole life is ruined.*
- 4. Drama/ Catastrophizing.** *The sky is falling! I'll die of embarrassment! You are killing me!*
- 5. Taking things personally.** Thinking it is all about you. *“I must have done something to cause this” “If you loved me, you would not do that!” “This has to be my fault.”*
- 6. Blame fallacy: “You made me feel this way!”** *Other people are responsible for my feelings, they cause my feelings. It is their responsibility to make me feel better, not mine.*
- 7.“Shoulding” on yourself.** Using “should” for perfection, punishment or criticism, creating guilt and shame. *“I should have known better.” “They can make that mistake, but I shouldn't have done that!”*
- 8. Emotional Reasoning— Mistaking feelings for facts.** *“I feel it, therefore it must be true.” “If I feel stupid and boring, then I must be stupid and boring. If I feel guilty, I must be bad. If I feel stressed, I must be failing.”*
- 9. Change fallacy: attempting to change other people.** *“If I complain, nag, demand , pout ,remind, beg, help, love or wait long enough..I can make other people change into who I want them to be.”*
- 10. Perfectionistic double standards.** *Unrealistic standards for self., but not others. “ Others are allowed to make mistakes, have flaws etc.. but I have to be perfect. I am not like other people. I must be perfect, no mistakes”.*
- 11. Mind reading or jumping to conclusions.** *Without asking others, assuming what others think or feel. “They think I am boring” “They won't like me anymore if they know the truth..”*



Not sure if your thoughts are distorted? Ask yourself these questions:

1. What is actually true right now? *(Example: measurable or observable facts in current time)*
2. How would I view this situation if it were happening to someone else?
3. How would I advise someone else who was experiencing a situation such as this?
4. When I think about this, what is my intention, goal, or desired outcome?
5. How could I cope and problem-solve?
6. What do I want to role model?

Tips for Using Distorted Thoughts Inventory

**Just because you *think* something, (example: “I’m stupid”) doesn’t make it true.
Just because you *feel* something (example: feel like a failure) doesn’t make it factual.**

Cognitive means thoughts. *Distortion* refers to twisted, not normal. **The term *cognitive distortions* refers to thoughts that are not true, are twisted or false.** Your distorted thoughts will *feel real*. The human body is designed to connect thoughts and emotions—regardless of whether or not those thoughts are true.

If you *imagine* a chain saw murderer outside your window—the goosebumps on your arm are *real*. When your *mind creates* a love affair with your favorite movie star, your tingling sensations are *real*.

Emotional signals in your body are not proof that the thoughts causing the sensations are true.

The children’s story featuring Chicken Little provides a nice example of a cognitive distortion. When an acorn fell on Chicken Little’s head, the startled and frightened chick *exaggerated, assumed* and quickly *jumped to a conclusion* that predicted doom and gloom by crying out “*the sky is falling, the sky is falling?!*” Chicken Little believed the sky was falling. That was not a lie. That was a *thought distortion*. **Just as in the story of Chicken Little, your distorted thoughts create a story that you made up in your head.**

Thoughts and feelings do not always mean something is true or real.

Reality checks help transform exaggerated, distorted and pessimistic emotional reactions into more realistic, grounded and solution-focused actions. Take a moment to reflect on the situations or events that routinely trigger your most distressing emotional reactions.

- What sets off your distress?
- What triggers your guilt, insecurity, doubt, worry or depression?
- When do you feel jealous, irritated, annoyed or angry?

True versus distorted thoughts: Evaluate whether or not your emotions are triggered by thoughts related to real, factual and measurable events.

(Examples: Divorce papers served, medical results conclusive, pink slip received, or employee evaluation documented.)

Notice when your emotions are triggered by assumptions, exaggerations or by time-travel “what if” worries about future events that may or may not occur.

(Examples: What if they don’t like me? What if I mess up? What if I get sick? I am afraid I will never be good enough to...)

If your thoughts and emotions are not based on present, verifiable reality, you have created a **cognitive distortion*. False beliefs are called *distorted thoughts*.

*David Burns MD identified the common thought distortions which are outlined on the previous page.