

Information handout

US English

Unhelpful Thinking Styles



Unhelpful Thinking Styles

Description

Our minds are always interpreting the world around us, trying to make sense of events. Sometimes we see the world accurately – as it really is – but often our minds take ‘short cuts’ and our thinking can become biased. These biases or ‘cognitive distortions’ can have powerful effects upon how we feel. Aaron Beck first identified distorted thinking in people suffering from depression in the 1960’s. It formed a central part of his cognitive theory of depression, and later, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

“[The depressed patient] tends to perceive his present, future, and the outside world (the cognitive triad) in a negative way and consequently shows a biased interpretation of his experiences, negative expectancies as to the probable success of anything he undertakes, and a massive amount of self-criticism”.

Beck (1963)

Distorted thinking has been found to be associated with all types of mental health problems: from depression and anxiety to OCD and eating disorders (Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979; Clark & Beck, 2010). Cognitive therapy proposes that thoughts, feelings, and behavior are inter-related and that changing unhelpful thinking can lead to changes in feelings and behavior. The cognitive therapy approach is first to identify distorted thinking and then to test or alter distortions using cognitive restructuring techniques. Techniques such as examining the evidence for and against a thought, or decentering and taking the perspective of a compassionate other are helpful approaches.

Beck originally identified five distortions in 1963 and added two additional distortions in his 1979 book *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*. David Burns was an early student of Beck and helped to both expand the original list of cognitive distortions and describe them using accessible language. The ten most commonly presented cognitive distortions are:

- **All-or-nothing thinking** describes thinking or acting in extremes. Burns describes it as the tendency to evaluate one’s personal qualities in extreme black-or-white categories.
- **Overgeneralization** describes seeing a pattern based on too little data.
- **Mental filter or selective abstraction** describes only paying attention to certain types of

evidence. Beck described selective abstraction as *“the process of focusing on a detail taken out of context, ignoring other more salient features of the situation, and conceptualizing the whole experience on the basis of this element”*.

- **Disqualifying the positive** describes the process of dismissing positive information, for example ‘writing off’ positive events as a ‘fluke’ or saying that they don’t count.
- **Jumping to conclusions** is described by Burns as *“arbitrarily jumping to a negative conclusion that is not justified by the facts”*. With the ‘fortune telling’ variant we imagine and predict that bad things will happen to us. With the ‘mind reading’ variant we assume that other people are thinking negatively about us.
- **Magnification and minimization** describe how we exaggerate imperfections and errors while minimising achievements and strengths.
- **Emotional reasoning** describes the process of taking one’s emotions as evidence of truth., For example feeling hopeless and concluding that a problem is therefore impossible to solve.
- **“Should” statements** reflect our (often unreasonable) standards (*“I should do this”, “I must do that”*) and frequently lead to feelings of frustration, shame, or guilt.
- **Labeling and mislabeling** describe the process of ‘summing up’ ourselves or others by labeling ourselves with tags such as *“I am hopeless”* or *“I am stupid”*.
- **Personalization and blame** describe occasions when you conclude – arbitrarily – that what happened was your fault even when you were not responsible.

This *Unhelpful Thinking Styles* information handout gives details of 10 common cognitive distortions. Clients often find the label of ‘unhelpful thinking styles’ less pejorative than ‘cognitive distortions’ or ‘thinking errors’.

Instructions

Sometimes the thoughts we have don’t paint a fair picture of what has happened to us. For example, you might make a mistake one time and overgeneralize by thinking to yourself “I never get things right!”. This isn’t fair because it’s an exaggeration – it is likely that there are lots of times when you do things successfully. Or your partner might be late home from work and you jump to the conclusion – without any evidence – “they’ve been hurt in a car crash”. We call these thinking habits ‘unhelpful thinking styles’ because they can cause us suffering. This page describes the most common unhelpful thinking styles that are experienced by everyone at some point. I wonder, do you recognize yourself in any of these biases?

References

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Unhelpful Thinking Styles

All or nothing thinking

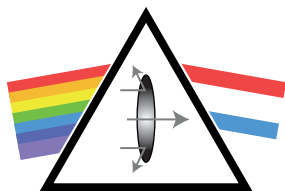


Sometimes called 'black and white thinking'.

If I'm not perfect I have failed.

Either I do it right or not at all.

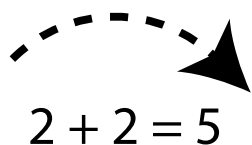
Mental filter



Only paying attention to certain types of evidence.

Noticing our failures but not seeing our successes.

Jumping to conclusions



There are two key types of jumping to conclusions:

- **Mind reading** (imagining we know what others are thinking).
- **Fortune telling** (predicting the future).

Over-generalizing

"everything is always rubbish."
"nothing good ever happens."

Seeing a pattern based upon a single event, or being overly broad in the conclusions we draw.

Disqualifying the positive



Discounting the good things that have happened or that you have done for some reason or another.

That doesn't count

Magnification (catastrophizing) & minimization



Blowing things out of proportion (catastrophizing), or inappropriately shrinking something to make it seem less important.

Emotional reasoning



Assuming that because we feel a certain way what we think must be true.

I feel embarrassed so I must be an idiot.

should must

Using critical words like 'should', 'must', or 'ought' can make us feel guilty, or like we have already failed.

If we apply 'shoulds' to other people the result is often frustration.

Labeling



Assigning labels to ourselves or other people.

I'm a loser.

I'm completely useless.

They're such an idiot.









Personalization

"this is my fault."

Blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn't completely your fault.

Conversely, blaming other people for something that was your fault.

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

 <p>All or nothing thinking</p>	<p>Thinking in extremes. For example, something is either 100% good or bad.</p>
 <p>Catastrophizing</p>	<p>Jumping to the worst possible conclusion.</p>
 <p>Over-generalizing</p>	<p>Seeing a pattern based upon a single event.</p>
 <p>Mental filter</p>	<p>Only paying attention to certain types of evidence ("that doesn't count").</p>
 <p>Disqualifying the positive</p>	<p>Discounting positive information or twisting a positive into a negative.</p>
 <p>Jumping to conclusions</p>	<p>Mind reading or predicting the future.</p>
 <p>Low frustration tolerance</p>	<p>Saying things like "this is too difficult", "this is unbearable" or "I can't stand it".</p>
 <p>Minimization</p>	<p>Discounting the importance of something.</p>
 <p>Emotional reasoning</p>	<p>Assuming that because we feel a certain way our hunch must be true.</p>
<p>SHOULD MUST</p> <p>Demands</p>	<p>Using words like 'should', 'must', and 'ought'.</p>
 <p>Labeling</p>	<p>Assigning labels to ourselves or others ("I'm rubbish").</p>
<p>"this is my fault"</p> <p>Personalization</p>	<p>Taking too much or too little responsibility.</p>

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