

NINE WAYS TO MAKE YOURSELF MISERABLE (Cognitive Distortions)

Cognitive distortions are inaccuracies in our thinking. We can think of our thoughts as representations of reality, sort of like a photograph. If we have a smudge on the lens of the camera, then the photo will show a picture which does not accurately represent what was in front of the camera. Even if the lens is clear and we take a picture of only part of an object, then the picture will not accurately portray the whole object. It is safe to assume that everyone has cognitive distortions. Please do not assume that you are hopelessly defective if you recognize some or all of those that are described below.

It can be very helpful to be able to identify distortions in our thinking because once we have discovered the distortion, we will know how to correct it and feel better. Identifying our cognitive distortions is like diagnosing the thought problem. A good diagnosis usually points to a helpful remedy.

Below is a list of nine common distortions with examples of how they might occur. See if you can identify one or more ways that you have been victimized by this kind of thinking.

1. **All or Nothing/ Black or White:** Seeing things as though they were only two possible categories. *Example:* If a situation turns out imperfectly, you see it as a total failure. You forget to buy one item on a shopping list and think "Well, I really blew that trip" . Can you think of an example of how you have used this distortion? Try writing it down below.

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2. **Overgeneralizing:** A negative event is seen as a never-ending pattern of defeat. *Example:* When shopping you notice that your check-out line is moving very slowly and think, "Why do I always pick the slowest line?" Your example:

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3. **Mental Filter:** Seeing only negative aspects of a situation while screening out the positive aspects . *Example:* You focus on a critical comment someone made while ignoring all the compliments you received. Your example:

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2 Ways of Jumping to Conclusions: Predicting things will go a certain way before you have the facts by mind reading or fortune telling:

4. **Mind Reading:** Assuming that you know exactly what someone is or will be thinking about you. *Example:* An acquaintance doesn't seem as friendly as usual and you think, "He must be angry with me." Your example:
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5. **Fortune Telling:** Predicting that things will turn out badly and that you won't be able to cope. *Example:* before going to a social gathering, you have an image of people reacting negatively to you and you assume that you will be devastated. Your example:
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6. **Magnifying or Minimizing:** Over-evaluating or minimizing the importance of a situation or certain information. *Example:* Even though you may be a good parent and spouse, you think that it's shameful to have been laid off from a job. You get several job offers and accept one but think that it doesn't make up for the loss. Your example:
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7. **Emotional Reasoning:** Assuming that how you feel is an accurate reflection of how things are. *Example:* If you are feeling anxious, you assume that something bad is going to happen. Your Example:
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8. **Shoulds:** You tell yourself things "should" or "shouldn't" be a certain way. We do this with ourselves, with other people and situations. Variations of this can include "musts", "have to's" and other imperatives which sound like they come from some authority figure. *Example:* "You have to help me", "I shouldn't have done that". Your example:
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9. **Labeling:** This is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking which can be damaging to our self-esteem and our relationships. Instead of simply acknowledging a mistake, we say, "I'm such a screw-up" (substitute "loser", "idiot", "jerk", etc). Applying labels, "that SOB", will tend to blind us to other qualities which could benefit us in the relationship. Everyone has their favorites. What are yours?
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10. **Personalizing:** (Blaming) This distortion creates enormous preventable suffering. This occurs when we hold ourselves responsible for something which isn't or wasn't entirely under our control. As children, we personalize much of what happens around us including how we are treated. When a child is mistreated by a parent, she will tend to assume that she is somehow to blame and will see herself as defective. We do this as adults often without realizing it. Now we have a choice about becoming aware of this destructive distortion. Most importantly, we can change it! When this process is reversed, we blame someone else for a situation we have a part in creating. *Example:* The same person who noticed the friend who didn't seem as friendly as usual thought, "I must have done something wrong". Your examples:

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