

Cognitive Distortions



In Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, thinking errors, or “cognitive distortions” are systematic patterns of biased or irrational ways of thinking that distort people’s perception of reality, typically negatively.

All or Nothing Thinking: Seeing things in absolutes, either perfection or failure, good or bad - no middle ground.

Example: *“If I don’t get this job, I am a complete failure”*

Overgeneralisation: Taking a single negative event as evidence for a never-ending pattern of defeat.

Example: *“I failed this test, so I’ll probably fail all of them”*

Ignoring the Good: Focusing exclusively on negative details whilst ignoring positive ones.

Example: *Receiving positive feedback but dwelling on one criticism*

Disqualifying the Positive: Rejecting positive experiences by insisting they don’t count.

Example: *“I only succeeded because I got lucky”*

Mind Reading: Assuming you know what others are thinking, usually negatively.

Example: *“They think I’m incompetent”*

Fortune Telling: Predicting negative outcomes without definite facts.

Example: *“I know I’m going to mess up this presentation”*

More Cognitive Distortions



Catastrophising: Exaggerating the importance of negative things.

Example: *“My friend cancelled plans; they must hate me now”*

Emotional Reasoning: Assuming your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are.

Example: *“I feel anxious, something bad must be about to happen”*

“Should” Statements: Holding rigid rules about how you or others “should”, “must”, or “ought to” behave or feel, and feeling guilty, angry, or resentful when these rules are broken.

Labelling and Mislabelling: Attaching a negative, global label to yourself or others based on one specific behaviour, rather than describing the specific behaviour.

Example: *“They made a mistake, so they are an idiot”*

Personalisation: Blaming yourself for negative events that you are not responsible for or taking things personally when they are not connected to you.

Example: *“My friend is sad today; I must have done something to upset them”*

Confusing Feeling for Fact: Believing because you may feel something, it must be true.

Example: *“I feel like a bad friend – I am a bad friend”*

By recognising and questioning these thought patterns, we can begin to challenge their validity and whether they help or harm us.