

Common Cognitive Distortions (Thinking Errors)

- “SHOULD” – (Also known as “musts,” “oughts,” “shouldn’ts.”) - You construe events in terms of how things SHOULD BE rather than on what is. You pressure yourself and others based upon these “rules of fairness/rightness.” You have unrealistic thoughts, rigid rules, and strict expectations of yourself and/or others. These distortions set you up for resentment, disappointment and anger. Examples: “After everything I did for her, she should be more willing to help me.” “A relationship between a mother and daughter shouldn’t be this way.”
- CATASTROPHIZING – (Also known as awful-izing) - You believe that what has happened or will happen will be so terrible and intolerable that you won’t be able to stand it. You think in terms of worst-case scenario and overestimate the likelihood of a mishap without taking into consideration other possibilities. You magnify your faults and problems. You exaggerate the importance of things (such as a mistake or problem). Examples: “If I don’t get this job, it will be terrible.” “I had a flat tire and was late to work. It was the worst day ever.”
- PERSONALIZATION – You attribute a disproportionate amount of the blame for negative events to yourself and fail to recognize that certain events are also caused by or impacted by others. You take things personally that are marginally (or not even) relevant to you. You think that what other people say is specifically intended for you. You see yourself as the cause of some problem. Examples: “My marriage ended because I failed.” “I was late to work last week and then my boss sent out a memo about tardiness. It’s all my fault” (even though it’s not uncommon for your coworkers to also be late).
- “WHAT IFS” – You ask a series of questions about “what if” something happens, and you are never satisfied with any of the answers. You get stuck in all the “what if” scenarios rather than moving on to a solution. Examples: “What if my flight is late and I miss the interview?” “What if I go to the party and I don’t know anyone?”
- COMPARISONS – You interpret events/yourself in terms of standards that are unrealistic by focusing primarily on others who do better or you assume do better. Examples: “All the men my age own their own business and have huge homes and nice cars. I just rent an apartment.” “When I go on Facebook, everyone else is so skinny and happy. What’s wrong with me?”
- REGRET ORIENTATION – You focus on what you could have done better/differently in the past. Your thinking is not present focused, and you discount prior successes/achievements. “I could have a lot more money if I had accepted that job.” “I made so many mistakes in college; I messed up my whole life.”
- DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVE – You believe that the positive accomplishments that you or others attain are unimportant. You dismiss positive experiences by insisting that they don’t count for some reason. You see the glass as half empty. Examples: “My college was easy so the fact that I have a degree isn’t a big deal.” “Yea, I won the race, but I probably couldn’t do it again and other competitors weren’t that fit anyway.”

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- FORTUNE TELLING – You predict the future – that things will get worse or that there is danger ahead. You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you are convinced that your prediction is an already established fact. Examples: “I won’t get the job.” “I’ll be single and lonely forever.”
- MIND READING – You assume that you know what people think without having sufficient evidence of their thoughts. You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don’t bother to confirm that or to consider other possibilities. Examples: “My boss rushed me out of her office; She thinks I’m an idiot.” “My daughter’s teacher didn’t speak to me today. She hates me.”
- ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING/BLACK & WHITE THINKING/POLARIZED THINKING/DICHOTOMOUS THINKING – You see things as good or bad, smart or dumb, winner or loser. A binary way of thinking that does not consider that there are shades of gray or middle ground. You think in extremes. “I messed up on a question in the interview. It was a total waste of my time.” “I get rejected by everyone.”
- EMOTIONAL REASONING – You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are . You let your feelings guide your interpretation of reality. You neglect to consider that feelings are not always facts. Examples: “I feel overwhelmed; therefore, my problems must be impossible to solve.” “I know my spouse must be unfaithful because I feel jealous.”
- OVERGENERALIZATION & LABELING – You assign global undesirable qualities to yourself and others. We take one characteristic or behavior of a person (or self) and apply it to the whole person. Examples: “She is late for work all the time; she’s an irresponsible person.” “I didn’t meet my quota; I am such a failure.”
- BLAMING – You blame others for your mood or unhappiness. You focus on another person as the source of your feelings and you do not take responsibility for changing yourself. Examples: “My husband is why I am unhappy.” “My parents messed me up and are the reason why my life is a mess.”
- ASSUMPTIONS/JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS (USUALLY THE RESULT OF MIND READING AND/OR FORTUNE TELLING) - You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite fact that convincingly support your conclusion. Examples: “I’m not going to get the job.” “They don’t trust me to do the job because I don’t have a college degree.”