

Cognitive Distortions

Type of Cognitive Distortion	Also called...	Definition	Example(s)
All or Nothing Thinking	Black-or-white thinking Polarized thinking	Seeing no middle ground, seeing personal problems in extreme terms of either/or categories	<p><i>“I have to be completely pain-free or I’m dissatisfied.”</i></p> <p><i>“If I can’t work in my garden, I won’t work with plants or get outside at all.”</i></p>
Overgeneralization		The tendency to see a single, negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat	<p><i>“I had to leave the baseball game early today – I’ll never be able to enjoy anything again ever!”</i></p>
Discounting the Positive	Minimization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believing that positive information somehow “doesn’t count” as evidence that the situation is better than it seems. • Glossing over the positive factors, overlooking the fact that “nothing really bad happened.” 	<p>A friend comes over to visit and tells you that you look great. Your immediate thought is: <i>“I don’t feel great. She doesn’t understand.”</i></p>
Magnification	Catastrophizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blowing negative events out of proportion. • Thinking something is terrible, horrible, or awful, rather than it simply being “bad”. 	<p><i>“This is the WORST THING that’s ever happened to me.”</i></p> <p><i>“The pain is KILLING ME.”</i></p>
Labeling		Assigning a name to ourselves or others	<p><i>“I’m disabled.”; “I’m a failure.”</i></p> <p><i>“He’s a loser.”</i></p>
Mind Reading		You know what people are thinking and feeling and why they’re behaving in a particular way, even if they don’t explain.	<p><i>“Everyone at the store was judging me because I was using a scooter.”</i></p> <p><i>“He thinks I’m lazy because I didn’t clean the whole house today.”</i></p> <p>You pass a coworker in the hallway and he doesn’t respond when you say “Hi”. You think, <i>“He must be mad at me.”</i> When you check it out, you find that the coworker was just preoccupied about a sick child.</p>

Type of Cognitive Distortion	Also called...	Definition	Example
Fortune Telling	Jumping to Conclusions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forming an opinion before something even happens without knowing the facts. You “know” that things will turn out badly. Given your bad luck, you predict it as an already established fact. 	<p><i>“I know the doctor is going to think I’m exaggerating.”</i></p> <p><i>“I know if I mow the lawn I won’t sleep well tonight.”</i></p> <p>You wake up with a headache. You say, <i>“Now my whole day is ruined. I had so much to do and I’ll never get it all done.”</i></p>
Emotional Reasoning	Gut Feeling	Believing that your feelings are proof that your thoughts are accurate. You <i>feel</i> it, therefore it must be true.	<i>“I feel useless, therefore I am useless.”</i>
Confusing Needs with Wants		Thinking that you “need” something when in fact you only “want” it.	<i>“I need a 2nd (3rd, 4th) opinion about my back.”</i> Do you need it? Or just want to hear something different?
Shoulds and Musts	Rigid standards, Imperative Thinking	Rigid, unbending rules that you set for yourself or others. If you don’t live up to the high, unrealistic expectations, you feel guilty. If someone else does not live up to the standard, you get angry and resentful.	<i>“I shouldn’t ask for help.”</i> <i>“I should be able to do the laundry like I used to.”</i> <i>“She should know how I feel and stop asking me to do things.”</i>
Confusing “Choosing to” with “Having to”		Not realizing that something is a choice rather than a necessity.	<i>“I have to go visit my father even though I don’t want to.”</i> Vs. <i>“I choose to visit him.”</i> or <i>“I choose <u>not</u> to visit him today.”</i>
Personalization and Blame		Thinking all situations revolved around you OR solely blaming others for your misfortunes	<i>“I ruined the whole party because I wasn’t feeling talkative.”</i> <i>“It’s all the surgeon’s fault.”</i>
I-Can’t-Stand-It-it is		Believing that you cannot withstand, tolerate, or cope with a situation, when in fact you can.	<i>“I can’t tolerate the pain.”</i> (You have been!) <i>“It’s unforgivable that that jerk cut me off in traffic.”</i> (Is it really?)

Type of Cognitive Distortion	Also called...	Definition	Example
Comparing	Downward social comparisons Upward social comparisons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comparing yourself with someone else and ignoring all the basic differences. OR Comparing how you are NOW to “your old self” or how you were pre-injury or pre-illness. 	<p><u>Downward social comparisons</u> – When you compare yourself to someone you perceive as worse off than yourself. (“<i>At least I’m not as bad as that person.</i>”)</p> <p><u>Upward social comparisons</u> – when you compare yourself to someone you perceive as better off than yourself (“<i>The grass is always greener on the other side.</i>”)</p> <p><i>“I’m not my old self.” “I can’t do what I used to do.”</i></p>
Magical Worry		Believing that somehow your worry keeps the feared event from occurring. Gives you a false sense of control over the future.	<i>“If I keep worrying and thinking through the possibilities, I’ll be prepared for the worst and maybe it won’t happen.”</i>
Confusing Inability with Unwillingness		Thinking that you cannot do something when in fact you avoid it because you are reluctant.	<p><i>“I can’t go to church.”</i> Vs. <i>“I’m <u>reluctant</u> to sit through church because my pain might increase.”</i></p> <p>Be honest with yourself and try to seek compromise...e.g., <i>“Maybe I can try to sit through part of the service.”</i></p>
Confusing Possibility with Probability		Taking a remote possibility and making it a distinct probability.	<p>Feeling sure you’ll get a very rare side effect from the medication.</p> <p>Worrying about a very good driver in your family, sure that they will at any moment be in a car accident.</p>
Projection		Assigning your own motives or thoughts to someone else, thinking that they must think like you do.	<i>“She should have offered to help me by preparing meals...that’s what I would have done if she were sick.”</i>
Irrational Hopelessness/ Helplessness		Believing there is absolutely no solution to your problem.	<p><i>“I’ll never get ‘better’”.</i></p> <p><i>“If I don’t get relief, the only option is to kill myself.”</i></p>

