

Cognitive Distortions

People experiencing depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders tend to have unhealthy thinking patterns that are overly pessimistic. Everyone experiences negative thoughts, but when they become more frequent and/or stronger, they can create problems:

- (1) They can make us feel bad.
- (2) They are often exaggerated or inaccurate.
- (3) We tend to believe them without actually considering whether or not they are accurate.

Seeing oneself as a hopeless or bad person or feeling responsible whenever something goes wrong are examples of exaggerated, negative thoughts. Negative thoughts:

- affect our feelings
- change our behaviors
- are usually not true or only minimally true, although we tend to believe them anyway
- can lead us to feel bad about ourselves
- can lead us to feel negatively toward other people
- can make life and our future seem hopeless

We also call these negative thoughts **distortions** because they are typically not accurate. To help you better understand your most common distortions, read the examples below and mark the option that best describes how frequently you experience them. Consider challenging those distorted thoughts that occur “frequently” using the **thought record** below. If you find yourself checking “frequently” for most of the examples, consider printing out this worksheet and bringing it to your healthcare provider so you can work together to challenge those thoughts.

Distortion	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
All-or-nothing thinking: You see things in black and white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overgeneralization: You see a single negative event as never-ending pattern of defeat.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mental Filter: You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors an entire beaker of water.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Disqualifying the positive: You reject positive experiences by insisting they “don’t count.” You maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Jumping to conclusions: You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mind reading: You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively toward you without bothering to determine if your assumption is correct.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Fortune Teller Error: You anticipate that things will turn out badly and feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Magnification (catastrophizing) or minimization: You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your own goof-up or someone else’s achievement), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (such as your own desirable qualities or another person’s imperfections).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emotional reasoning: You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: “I feel it, therefore it must be true.”	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Should statements: You try to motivate yourself with “should” and “shouldn’ts,” as if you had to be punished before you could be expected to do anything. “Musts” and “oughts” are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When others direct should statements toward you, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Labeling and mislabeling: This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: “I’m a loser.” When someone else’s behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him, “He’s a loser.” Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Personalization: You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event for which, in fact, you were not primarily responsible.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Adapted from Burns, David D., MD. 1989. The Feeling Good Handbook. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.

Having a psychiatric disorder is often like having someone put gray paint over your glasses. You start to see the world as darker and different from how it actually is. A great self-care strategy is learning how to identify these negative thoughts and respond to them in a more realistic way. Learning this tool will help you to begin chipping away at the gray paint and seeing the world, including yourself, in a more accurate way.

Effects of a negative thought:

Situation: Waking up in the morning

Negative thoughts: I have too much to do today and will never get it all done.

Feeling: Hopeless, anxious

Distortion: All or nothing thinking

Response: Stay in bed and do not go to any classes

Effects of a rational thought:

Situation: Waking up in the morning

Rational thought: Today is going to be very busy, I will do what I can and get the most important tasks done first. The rest can wait until tomorrow.

Feeling: Hopeful and less anxious in the short term, followed later by a sense of accomplishment

Response: Get out of bed and make a list prioritizing the day's tasks.

Keeping a **thought record** is a good way to track and change your distortions. This can be a very helpful tool to use on your own or bring to the mental health clinician.

If you are having difficulty changing your distorted thoughts, try asking yourself the following questions:

1. What evidence do I have that this thought is true?
2. What evidence do I have that this thought is not true?
3. What would I tell a friend who had the same thought?
4. If it is true, are the consequences really that bad?

It is best to discuss your most distressing and strongest thoughts with your healthcare provider who can help you address them.

Thought Record

Negative Thought	Type of Distortion	Rational Response
<i>This psychiatric disorder has ruined my life.</i>	<i>All or Nothing Thinking</i>	<i>My illness is just one part of my life. There are several good things in my life, including friends, family, and school. They are all a part of my life, too. My life is not ruined.</i>