

Cognitive Distortions

What Are Cognitive Distortions?

Cognitive distortions are specific ways of thinking that hide, obscure, or distort reality. They may also be referred to as *thinking errors*. They are flawed beliefs people hold about themselves and the world around them, which are based on previous life experiences (both lived and observed), and can be learned. They are often rooted in the core belief system of the individual, and as such, can be observed in *intermediate beliefs* and *automatic thoughts*. These thoughts may seem like truth or fact, but are not often based in reality. They are developed in part, to help an individual make sense of the environment around them; and they also serve a protective purpose as they free, and insulate, individuals from the consequences of their own behaviors.

Cognitive distortions have many distinct qualities, some of which tie to our belief systems. Like *automatic thoughts*, cognitive distortions are often *unconscious*, and happen without us knowing we are using them. As with *intermediate* and *core beliefs*, they are *universal* in that any given thinking error can be applied to a broad range of situations.

Cognitive distortions are also often *embedded*, similar in nature to *core beliefs*, as they can exist at a deep level of the mind, where they may have existed for many years without being noticeable. An additional characteristic is they often tend to be *oversimplified*, meaning they leave out important details of the facts. Finally, cognitive distortions frequently take the form of *self-statements*, or the words that you say to yourself. You are constantly thinking and telling yourself things, which then influence your emotions, which then prompt your behavior.

Why Do We Use Cognitive Distortions?

As mentioned at the beginning of this module, cognitive distortions serve two main purposes: for protection and to make sense of the world (past, present, and future). With respect to how they protect us, cognitive distortions serve as a barrier to distressing feelings and experiences; or more simply, they defend us from feeling vulnerable. They also give us a false sense of control in a given situation, while also providing support to our maintaining a maladaptive thought or engaging in harmful and unhealthy behaviors.

Throughout our lives, but particularly when we are children, when we have experiences that are frightening, hurtful, or confusing, we create thoughts and narratives that help us in making sense of such emotionally charged events. In

instances like these, we use thinking errors as a defense against the distress we experience for lack of understanding or the feeling of distressing emotions. These explanations, with rare exception, will not reflect the reality of the situation, but may allow us to *feel* like we understand that experience. And, once we have an explanation, we may further develop the perception that we can make predictions about the future based upon this false understanding.

What Do Cognitive Distortions Look Like?

Cognitive distortions take a number of forms. They most often arise in situations when we feel threatened, afraid, hurt, or angry, because those are the times when we feel the strongest need to hide from reality. Reality may often include facts that make us frightened or unhappy, and cognitive distortions allow us to hide from those facts. We feel less vulnerable because the focus is off us and on someone else or some explanatory circumstance.

It is like using duct tape to make a repair. At first it isn't the most solid fix, but even if it doesn't hold, we will just add duct tape to make it solid. And like magic, it works! Before long, it just becomes the way we repair things, and why not? It works for other things! But if we don't address the leak or damage fully, by taking the effort to see the ugly problem and deal with the reality, the consequences can be severe. So, in looking at using cognitive distortions to escape reality and avoid the times when we feel hurt, angry, or afraid, we must choose to stop ourselves and examine our thoughts to check for distortions.

There is a saying, "You don't know what you don't know, until you know it." To help in identifying cognitive distortions, here are some of the most common types used by people, along with examples of what they may sound like when used.

1. All Or Nothing Thinking

Also referred to as "black and white" thinking, "polarized thinking," or "splitting," this is the belief that things are all one way or the other, either all good or all bad. People are either friends or enemies, either complete successes or total failures, either saints or monsters. This distortion ignores the complexity of situations and individuals and reduces everything down to a single judgmental quality.

Examples:

- "I didn't do everything perfectly, so I'm a total screw-up."
- "That guy said something that made me mad; he must be a complete asshole."

2. “Catastrophizing” (Doomsday Thinking)

This involves grossly exaggerating the potential negative consequences of a situation. Any bad thing that happens becomes the end of the world, and you can't think about anything else or keep things in perspective. This can result in “doomsday thinking,” when you become so focused on the possibility of a terrible crisis that you become paralyzed and cannot respond to a negative situation with any positive solutions.

Examples:

- “My boss said I made a mistake—now I’m going to be fired and I’ll get evicted because I can’t pay my rent, I should just quit before that happens.”
- “That person said they didn’t want to go out with me—I must be ugly and I’ll never be with someone, I shouldn’t even try.”

3. Mind Reading

This is believing that you know what someone is thinking based on their behavior, or based on what you expect them to be thinking. There is also the reverse of this, assuming that other people know what you are thinking without you telling them. This distortion ignores the fact that a guess is not the same thing as knowing, even if that guess is partially correct, and also ignores the fact that the human mind is complex and often contains more than one thing at a time.

Examples:

- “I saw that dirty look you gave me; you must hate me.”
- “My wife shouldn’t have gotten mad when I called her that name; she should have known I was joking and I didn’t mean anything by it.”

4. Fortune Telling

Fortune telling happens when you believe that you know in advance what will happen in a situation, or that you know how things would have turned out if someone had done something differently. Just like Mind Reading, this distortion ignores the fact that a guess is not the same thing as knowing; we can all guess a specific outcome once in a while, but there’s a big difference between guessing an outcome and knowing the future. This distortion ignores the fact that anyone can be wrong, even when they’re sure they’re right.

Examples:

- “Every time I mention this to someone they get mad, therefore everyone I mention it to in the future will always get mad.”
- “This only happened because my coworker screwed up; if they had just stayed out of it everything would have been fine.”

5. Personalization

Personalization is believing that you are the cause of events which may have nothing to do with you, or believing that you were the target of events which may have not been directed at you specifically. This distortion ignores the fact that we are not the center of the universe, no matter how much we may feel that we are. There can be a number of reasons why something happens or why someone does something, and just because we were there or were affected by it doesn't mean that we were the cause.

Example:

- “My parent is angry; therefore, I must have done something to make them angry.”
- “The teacher yelled at the whole class, but I know they were really yelling at me.”

6. Focusing On The Negative

This involves only paying attention to things that affect us negatively. It is also called “invalidating the positive,” because when you are so focused on bad things, you may forget to notice the positive events, or may believe that they are unimportant. This distortion ignores the fact that situations often have both positive and negative elements at the same time, and that positive things are just as important as negative ones.

Example:

- “When I made that speech, I got some words wrong and some people laughed. Sure, they all clapped at the end, but I'm sure I looked like an idiot because I made a mistake.”
- “Every relationship I've ever been in has ended badly for me. Sure, there may have been some good times too, but in the end relationships are nothing but pain.”

7. Denial/Minimization

Denial/minimization happens when you believe that certain things are tiny or unimportant when in fact they may be quite important. This often takes the form of comparing things to bigger things so that they seem smaller by comparison. This distortion ignores the fact that little things often seem big to others, just as things that seem big to us often seem little to others. Each person has their own experience of what is important and what is not, and this distortion ignores the fact that each of those experiences is valid.

Example:

- “I only hit my son once; some people hit their kids all the time. Therefore what I did wasn’t so bad.”
- “I feel proud of what I’ve accomplished but no one besides me cares; I guess compared to what others have accomplished it’s not a big deal after all.”

8. “Should” Statements

“Should” statements focus on the difference between the way the world is and the way you want it to be, even when it is not within your power to change the world. Besides “Should,” these statements also take the form of “must,” “ought to,” and “have to” statements. This distortion ignores the fact that it is not up to us to decide how the world “should” be, and makes us waste our time focusing on problems that we cannot solve instead of directing our energies towards problems we can solve.

Example:

- “When I do everything right I should get rewarded; it’s not fair that I am punished when I don’t deserve it.”
- “That isn’t the way I would have handled that situation; that person should have handled it the way I would have.”

9. Emotional Reasoning

Emotional reasoning is believing that your negative emotions reflect a negative reality—literally, that if you believe something bad is true, therefore it must be true. Like Mind Reading, this distortion ignores the fact that anyone can be wrong even when they’re certain they’re right. This distortion is particularly difficult to deal with because often our negative feelings really do feel true, even when there is no evidence to support them other than the feeling itself. This distortion also ignores the fact that negative feelings will change with time, and that no negative feeling lasts forever.

Examples:

- “I feel hopeless, like nothing will ever work out right. That must be true—nothing will ever work out right, so why even try?”
- “I feel afraid that people don’t like me, and I worry that they think I’m stupid and ugly. That must be true—they don’t like me, and I am stupid and ugly.”

10. Immediate Gratification

Immediate gratification is the belief that if you want something, you have to fill that need right away, and you cannot let a need go unfulfilled, as if you were at the mercy of your needs without any control over them. This can also manifest as a desire to end negative emotional states right away, without considering the consequences. This distortion ignores the fact that most needs don’t actually have to be filled right away, and most negative states can actually be borne without harm. This distortion also ignores the fact that trying to immediately fill a need often comes with negative consequences that could have been avoided by showing self-restraint.

Example:

- “I was horny and I wanted to have sex, so I couldn’t stop myself even when she said no.”
- “I got upset by something he said, so I had to end the conversation and walk out, I couldn’t stand being upset for another second.”

11. Unrealistic Expectations

Unrealistic expectations happen when you believe that the only solutions to problems are perfect ones, and that these solutions solve the problem for all time. We may expect ourselves to enact these perfect solutions, or we may expect them to be enacted by others for our benefit, but we can’t be satisfied with any solution that is less than perfect. This distortion ignores the fact that no solution is ever perfect, and even problems that have been solved tend to recur over time. This distortion puts us in danger of being frustrated with ourselves because we can’t live up to our own expectations, or disappointed when others don’t live up to those expectations.

Examples:

- “I can’t get married until I find a partner who will never get angry with me or criticize me for anything.”
- “They told me the medication would help my symptoms, but I still have some problems, so I guess the medication is worthless.”

12. Victim Stance

Taking a victim stance happens when you believe that if you were hurt, someone must have done it on purpose, and the fact that you were hurt means no one else's feelings matter. This often manifests as believing other people were in control of things you do or were responsible for your actions. This distortion ignores the fact that, even when we are hurt, we are still responsible for our own actions, and just because someone hurts us doesn't mean they were doing it deliberately. Like Emotional Reasoning, this distortion is often difficult to deal with because when we are hurt or frightened it is often difficult to think about anything else. However, the fact remains that other peoples' feelings are as important to them as ours are to us, and we cannot ignore them even when we are upset.

Examples:

- “What she said really hurt my feelings, so I had to hit her; she was trying to get me mad and she deserved what she got.”
- “I don't see why anyone else is complaining, since I'm the one who was hurt by this—they were the ones responsible, not me, so what do they have to complain about?”

13. Justifying

Justifying is believing that if there is a good reason for doing something, that negates all the reasons for not doing that thing. This can also manifest as “explaining away” the negative consequences of an action by focusing on the intent of the action. This distortion ignores the fact that the intent behind an action does not necessarily dictate the outcome. Just like someone can hurt us without meaning to, so can we have a perfectly good reason for doing something that has negative consequences for ourselves or others, and what we intended doesn't necessarily make the outcome any different.

Examples:

- “Yeah, I was driving drunk, but my friend really needed a ride and she didn't have any other way to get home.”
- “I was stealing to feed my family—no one can blame a man for doing whatever it takes to look out for his loved ones.”

14. Desire For Fairness

This is believing that the world needs to be fair, and any time it isn't, that justifies acts of revenge or retribution. This is really a combination of Should Thinking, Unrealistic

Expectations, and Justifying, and can contain elements of Personalization or Immediate Gratification as well. This often manifests as feelings of being hurt by something unfair and feeling entitled to “balance the scales”, either by hurting someone else or taking something to make up for the hurt feelings. This distortion ignores the fact that everyone gets hurt sometimes, and everyone feels that they have been treated unfairly sometimes—the world does not come with a set of rules that say that everything has to seem perfectly balanced to everyone at all times. Sometimes we have to accept something that doesn't seem fair instead of setting out to get vengeance or settle the score.

Examples:

- “I didn't do anything wrong, but I got punished anyway, so if I go down everyone who punished me is going down, too.”
- “I grew up without the advantages wealthier people had, so if I steal from them it's just getting back what I'm owed.”

What Can We Do About Cognitive Distortions?

As you can see from the examples above, cognitive distortions are often used to defend us from some fact that seems painful or hard to comprehend. Because they are *defensive* and give us the perception of feeling safe, cognitive distortions can be very hard to change, since taking away our defenses leaves us feeling vulnerable and afraid. We can't go through life defenseless, after all, and we don't like giving up the things that protect us.

To change our cognitive distortions and start thinking more realistically, we must face the distortions head on and create more realistic ways of thinking, while also at the same time feeling safe and confident in ourselves. Although it may seem contradictory, changing our cognitive distortions occurs when we challenge them and create counterthoughts. To do this, we must:

1. Identify the cognitive distortion(s).
2. Replace the distortion with a counterstatement or counterthought that provides a more realistic description or assessment of the situation.
3. Develop skills to cope with the emotions that accompany challenging your distortions. (Emotion Regulation.)
4. Be persistent in challenging your thoughts. Challenging thoughts takes hard work and feels uncomfortable! Show courage!

As mentioned, the best antidote for a cognitive distortion is an effective counterstatement or counterthought. An important note is that counterstatements and counterthoughts, like cognitive distortions, are self-statements. They are things we say to ourselves, not usually to others.

What makes up a good counterstatement?

First, it must be realistic and indicative of the reality of the event. Second, the more simple the counterstatement, the better and easier it will be to use. There is no need to swallow a horse pill when a small one will do. Third, it must only be about you and your issue/mistake/problem behavior. You cannot attach qualifiers to it.

Let's look at some examples for some of the distortions above:

1. **Distortion:** "I only hit my son once; some people hit their kids all the time. Therefore what I did wasn't so bad."

Counterstatement: "Children do not deserve to be hit."

2. **Distortion:** "My boss said I made a mistake—now I'm going to be fired and I'll get evicted because I can't pay my rent, I should just quit before that happens."

Counterstatement: "I am not perfect and make mistakes sometimes."

3. **Distortion:** "What she said really hurt my feelings, so I had to hit her; she was trying to get me mad and she deserved what she got."

Counterstatement: "I wouldn't want to be hit if I said something hurtful."