

# CBT: Cognitive distortions

In 1976, American psychiatrist Aaron Beck first proposed the theory behind cognitive distortions. In the 1980s, psychiatrist and behavioral scientist David Burns was responsible for popularising it by using common names for the distortions.

Cognitive distortions are all about perceptions, or how we see ourselves and the world around us. When we have distorted cognitions, it means our brain is lying to us. If you're an addict, your thinking has probably become a little distorted.

Your automatic thoughts have become skewed away from reality. This doesn't mean that you are delusional, psychotic or are experiencing hallucinations, but the tracking between reality and your perception of reality has lost accuracy. It means your thinking is *not quite right*. Most people experience cognitive distortions to some degree. It's normal and how much those distorted thoughts impact on you and others depends on many factors in your background and psychological make-up.

Don't worry too much if you recognize that you have a lot of the distortions in this module. Everybody has degrees of distorted thoughts. It's when it's causing major disruption to your own life, or those of others, that you need to take stock and explore solutions. Please attempt each question in this workbook honestly, so that you can become aware of even the slightest distortions you may have. This will help you learn about them so that you can identify them in yourself and others, if they become extreme. The most common thought distortions are as follows:

## 1. Filtering

You filter your thoughts through a lens that picks up only the negative aspects of a situation, person or thing, regardless of the amount of positive information available.

An example may be - you're at a party where almost everybody tells you how good you're looking. Only one person at the party mentioned that you're looking tired. You discount all the positive messages you received and focus only on that one negative statement, which ruins your experience. When you filter like this, your thinking is not only inaccurate, but can worsen the symptoms of anxiety and depression and bring on the urge to use your drug.

## 2. Polarised thinking (or “black and white” thinking)

This is termed black and white thinking because it does not allow for any shades of grey. People with this distortion are trapped in a world of anxiety-based concrete opinions, which ultimately disconnects (or protects) them from the reality of the nuances and complexities of life and humans.

For example: if your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure. When you're convinced that you're either destined for success or doomed to failure, that the people in your life are either angelic or evil, that something is either wonderful or terrible, you're probably engaging in polarised thinking.

### 3. Over-generalisation

You make general assumptions from a single event or situation. For example, you have a negative experience in one relationship and develop a belief that you simply aren't good in any relationships at all.

### 4. Jumping to conclusions

#### a) "Mind-reading"

Without people telling you anything they're thinking, you believe you know what they're thinking. When you're mind-reading, you're assuming that you can determine how people are feeling about you or about other things without any confirmation from them.

For example, you may conclude that someone is reacting negatively towards you, but you don't actually find out if your assumption is correct. They may be having a bad day or focusing intently on something else, but you've assumed that the frown on their face is because of you. Of course, it is sometimes possible to have an idea of what other people are thinking, but this distortion refers to the negative interpretations we seize upon.

#### b) "Fortune-telling"

A sister distortion to mind-reading, "fortune-telling" is the tendency to make conclusions and predictions based on little or no evidence, and to stick to them as gospel truth.

One example of fortune-telling is a young, single woman predicting that she'll never find love or have a committed and happy relationship, based only on the fact that she hasn't found it yet. There's simply no way for her to know how her life will turn out, but she sees this prediction as fact, rather than one of several possible outcomes.

### 5. Catastrophising or "magnifying"

This is a form of exaggerating the impact of situations. Disaster is often imminent. You may be labelled a "drama queen" if you have this sort of distorted thinking. It leads you to dread, or assume the worst, when faced with situations. When you catastrophise, ordinary worries can quickly escalate. For instance, an expected cheque doesn't arrive in the mail. A person who catastrophises may begin to fear it will never arrive and that, as a consequence, it won't be possible to pay the rent, so the whole family will be evicted!

It's easy to dismiss catastrophising as a hysterical over-reaction, or just being a "drama queen", but people who have developed this cognitive distortion may have experienced repeated adverse events — like chronic pain or childhood trauma — so often that they fear the worst in many situations. Their brain has been trained to prepare for the worst. This can take some unlearning, but CBT can and does work for them. If you're one of these people, hang in there — it does get better!

## 6. Personalisation

Personalisation puts you at the centre of everything, taking everything personally or assigning blame to yourself without any logical reason for believing that you're to blame. It's a distortion where you believe that everything others do or say is some kind of direct, or personal reaction to or about you. You may also compare yourself with others, trying to determine who's smarter, better-looking, has a better car, house, spouse, etc.

You may also see yourself as the cause of some external event for which you weren't responsible. This distortion covers a wide range of situations, from assuming you're the reason a friend didn't enjoy the girls' night out, to the more severe examples of believing that you're the cause of every instance of moodiness or irritation in those around you.

## 7. Control fallacies

Firstly, the definition of a fallacy is "a mistaken belief, particularly one based on unsound arguments". Therefore, a control fallacy is a belief about control, based on false information.

A control fallacy manifests as one of two beliefs: (1) External – you are a passive traveller through life with no control, believing that everything that happens is "meant to be" or 'controlled by the universe' or the 'forces of fate' or (2) Internal – that you're in complete control of yourself and your surroundings, making you responsible for the feelings of those around you. Both beliefs are damaging, and both are equally inaccurate.

No-one is in complete control of what happens to them, and no-one has absolutely no control over their situation. Even in extreme situations where you seemingly have no choice in what you do or where you go, you still have a certain amount of control over how you approach your situation mentally.

### a) External

If you have external control fallacies, you tend to blame others for your shortcomings. For example: "I can't help it I'm unable to get to work on time. My friends made me stay out way too late."

### b) Internal

The fallacy of internal control means you think you're responsible for everybody's feelings. You believe you have the power, or "superpower", to influence everybody. For example: "You look angry. Is it something I did?"

## 8. Fallacy of fairness

While you'd probably prefer to operate in a world that's fair, the assumption of an inherently fair world isn't based on reality and can foster negative feelings when you're faced with proof of life's unfairness. If you judge every experience by its perceived fairness, then you've fallen for this fallacy and will likely feel anger, resentment and hopelessness when you inevitably encounter a situation that isn't fair. This is a recipe for depression and lost opportunities in life.

## 9. Blaming

Blaming is similar to control fallacies, but not exactly the same. With blaming, we're not only playing the victim role, but we're holding other people responsible for our pain. For example: "You're making me feel bad about myself!" Nobody can "make" you feel any particular way — only you have control over your own emotions and reactions. By the same token blaming can be turned inward, and you can blame yourself for things you had nothing to do with.

## 10. Shoulds

You may often believe you're trying to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn'ts. For example: "*I really should exercise. I shouldn't be so lazy.*" Musts and oughts are also offenders. The emotional consequence when you direct this distortion inward is guilt. When you direct "should" statements towards others, you may feel anger, frustration and resentment.

Another common statement used in recovery is: "Try not to 'should' on yourself today." Try this exercise: every time you think or say the word "should", replace it immediately with the word "could" or "would". Language is very powerful. So instead of saying: "I should exercise", say: "I could exercise." You may feel more empowered and less guilty from that simple shift of one word.

## 11. Emotional reasoning

This is when you believe that what you feel must be true automatically. If you feel stupid and boring, then you must be stupid and boring. You assume that your uncomfortable emotions reflect the way things really are — "*I feel it, therefore it must be true.*"

People in recovery are often heard saying: "*Feelings aren't facts*" to remind themselves of this fact.

## 12. Fallacy of change

This way of thinking can be considered selfish or controlling because it insists, for example, that other people change to suit your needs. You may expect them to change their schedule to accommodate yours, or demand that your partner shouldn't wear his or her favourite T-shirt because you don't like it. It shows a lack of self-belief, where you depend on others to mould to your needs, rather than work out how to meet your own. This is fraught with disappointment and friction with others.

## 13. Global labelling

Labelling is reducing a person to a label, based on one or two behaviors that you deem then globally defines the person. You can do it to yourself too. Instead of calling out

the behavior, the person is labelled as a descriptor of the event or behavior. For instance, 'she's a drunk', 'I'm a failure', rather than that person is drunk at the moment, or 'I didn't do very well on that exam, but I can do better next time.'

When someone else's behavior rubs you up the wrong way, you may attach an unhealthy label to them, such as: "That person is a real jerk!" Mislabelling involves describing an event with language that is highly coloured and emotionally loaded. Berating yourself and/or others is bound to cause unhappiness within you.

#### **14. Always being right**

Being wrong is not an option. You exhaust yourself and everyone around you with your compulsive need to be right all the time. Being right often is more important than the feelings of others around you, even loved ones, when you engage in this cognitive distortion.

You can also fight with your own thoughts, making one thought righter than the other, causing yourself unhappiness. Use of the question "Do I want to be right, or do I want to be happy?" is a good start here. People in recovery say: "We've quit the debating society." We have to, if we want to be happy.

#### **15. Heaven's reward fallacy**

You place a lot of emphasis on your thoughts of being a good person to receive an ultimate reward. You may feel that Karma isn't balancing out. You may do the right thing only to be acknowledged and gain some kind of luck or reward. People with this fallacy tend to be in fear a lot and feel disappointed when their good deeds don't yield any sort of reward.

#### **Now what?**

You may be quite sure that you have every cognitive distortion in the book right now, but as we have said, most people have degrees of these distortions. It's when a distorted way of thinking is interrupting yours and others' lives in an unhealthy way that we recommend rethinking your thinking.

With this knowledge you can now start to identify your own patterns of thoughts, emotions and behaviors. You can come to understand how your thoughts shape the way you feel and behave and impact your life in significant ways.

If you don't see yourself, you can't understand your impact on others. When you can't see your impact on yourself or others, you live in a state of confusion or denial, and either state requires relief. Therefore, you may be tempted to use your drug for relief. With awareness comes freedom. The truth will always set you free.

Once you become aware of your irrational or distorted thoughts, you can learn to change them. The thoughts that once led to depression, anxiety and anger will be replaced with new, healthy alternatives. Finally, you can have control over how you think, feel and behave.

The good news is that if we're experiencing distorted thinking and it's causing suffering, you can change it quite easily if you practice CBT.

## References

<https://positivepsychology.com/cognitive-distortions/>

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<http://www.morehope.com.au/thinking-distortions.html>

<https://sourcesofinsight.com/10-distorted-thinking-patterns/>

<https://www.healthline.com/health/cognitive-distortions>

<https://www.slideshare.net/drkvanand/cognitive-distortions-depression-and-anxiety>

<https://inside.ewu.edu/caps/self-help/stress-management/distorted-thinking/>

## Recommended videos

*How to Stop Cognitive Distortions: Bad Thoughts and Poison Minds.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Niy54VJWPFE> (5:29 mins)

*TED Talk: What Reality are You Creating for Yourself? | Isaac Lidsky.*

[https://www.ted.com/talks/isaac\\_lidsky\\_what\\_reality\\_are\\_you\\_creating\\_for\\_yourself/up-next?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/isaac_lidsky_what_reality_are_you_creating_for_yourself/up-next?language=en) (11:38 mins)

*TED Talk: Thinking About Thinking: How to Challenge and Change Metacognitive Beliefs | Katy O'Brien.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkYWwbj7Yw> (16:56 mins)

*PODCAST: Identifying Cognitive Distortions.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRGV8TKXNI0> (4:10 mins)

## Questions: CBT: Cognitive Distortions

List examples you may recognize in your own thinking habits.

1. Can you name an example of **filtering** in your thoughts?

2. Can you name an example of **polarised (or “black and white”)** thinking in your thoughts?

3. Can you name an example of **over-generalization** in your thoughts?

#### 4. Jumping to conclusions

a) Can you name an example of “mind-reading” in your thoughts?

b) Can you name an example of “fortune-telling” in your thoughts?

c) Do you have an example of “fortune-telling” about some aspect of your addiction or recovery today?

5. Can you name an example of **catastrophising or “magnifying”** in your thoughts?

6. Can you name an example of **personalisation** in your thoughts?

**7. Control fallacies**

a) Can you name an example of an **external control fallacy** in your thoughts?

b) Can you name an example of an **internal control fallacy** in your thoughts?

8. Can you name an example of the **fallacy of fairness** in your thoughts?

9. Can you name an example of **blaming** in your thoughts?

10. Can you name an example of **“shoulds”** in your thoughts?

11. Can you name an example of **emotional reasoning** in your thoughts?

12. Can you name an example of the **fallacy of change** in your thoughts?

13. Can you name an example of **global labelling** in your thoughts?

14. Can you name an example of **always being right** in your thoughts?

15. Can you name an example of the **heaven's reward fallacy** in your thoughts?

16. **Attempt to complete the table** below for the three scenarios listed (fill in the white spaces).

Perspective	Situation	Thought	Feeling	Action
<b>Distorted</b>	Stranger looks at you with what you perceive to be a scowl	How dare he look at me like that!?		
<b>Healthy</b>		I have no idea who this person is, or how they normally behave, or what's happening in their life. It's probably not about me. I hope they're OK	Neutral	
<b>Distorted</b>	People are laughing as you walk into a room		Terrible, humiliated	
<b>Healthy</b>			Curious, interested	
<b>Distorted</b>	You have a bad night sleep	I'll never sleep again! It's just hopeless!		
<b>Healthy</b>				Practise sleep hygiene, cut out coffee and tea in the afternoon, avoid naps and do a relaxation exercise before going to bed