

24 Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions are patterns of thinking or processing information that are inaccurate, exaggerated, or otherwise irrational and can lead to negative emotions and unhelpful behaviours.

1. All or nothing thinking

This is when you see things in black-and-white terms, without any shades of gray. For example, you might think that you either succeed or fail, rather than recognizing that there is a range of possible outcomes. This type of thinking can lead to perfectionism and unrealistic expectations.

2. Overgeneralization

You overgeneralize when you assume that all people or experiences are the same based on one negative experience. For example, you go on a few bad dates and think, “I’ll never find love. I’m going to be alone forever.”

3. Filtering

Mental filtering usually happens when you focus solely on the negative and ignore all the other positive aspects or potential outcomes. For example, you might have a great day at work but focus on the one negative comment someone made to you.

4. Discounting the positive

You reject, minimize, or overlook the positive aspects of a situation or your abilities. With this distortion, you focus on the negative and ignore evidence to the contrary. For example, after successfully completing a big project, you only notice the small details that could have gone better.

5. Jumping to conclusions

This is when you make assumptions about something with little to no evidence. For example, you don't get an immediate reply to your text and conclude, “They’re just ignoring me on purpose. They don’t like me.”

6. Catastrophizing

When you catastrophize, you imagine the worst possible outcome for a situation, no matter how unlikely it is - causing yourself unnecessary stress and anxiety. For example you feel a slight headache and think, “This must be a brain tumour.”

7. Emotional reasoning

When you use emotional reasoning, you believe your feelings are facts. You assume that because you feel a certain way, it must be true. For example, you feel guilty about something, so you believe, “I’m a bad person.”

8. Should statements

When you use “should/ought/must/ if only” statements, you impose rigid, often unrealistic expectations on yourself and others. You criticize yourself or others with phrases like “I should have,” “I must,” or “they ought to,” leading to feelings of guilt, frustration. For example, “Everyone should like me and approve of what I do.”

9. Labelling

Labelling is when you assign a general, usually negative, label to yourself or others based on a single event or behaviour. You oversimplify complex situations or personalities by reducing them to a single, often harsh descriptor, ignoring all the nuances. For example, a politician you disagree with becomes “pure evil” in your mind.

10. Personalization and blame

This is when you blame yourself for events that are outside your control or assume that others’ actions and statements are direct reactions to you, even when there’s no evidence to support this belief. For example, you hear people laughing nearby and think, “They must be laughing at me.”

11. Fallacy of fairness

The fallacy of fairness occurs when you believe that life should always be fair and equitable. And if it’s not fair, then it’s not your fault, so you don’t have to do anything about it. For example, “I work harder than my coworker, so I should get the promotion instead of them.”

12. Blaming

When you engage in blaming, you hold others responsible for your emotions and problems, or you blame yourself entirely for situations that involve multiple factors (personalization). For example “I’m overweight because fast food companies make their food too addictive.”

13. Always being right

When you exhibit the “always being right” cognitive distortion, you constantly feel the need to prove that your actions, thoughts, or opinions are correct. You see disagreements as personal challenges and prioritize winning arguments over finding truth or maintaining relationships

14. Fallacy of change

The fallacy of change is when you think that your happiness depends on other people changing themselves. With this distortion, you avoid taking action to solve problems, instead thinking that people or circumstances will need to change first. For example, “If my partner would just be more romantic, our relationship would be perfect.”

15. Control fallacy

You have a false belief about having too much control over things that are out of your control (internal control fallacy). Or that you have no control over things that you can actually influence (external control fallacy). For example, insisting a first date goes exactly as you imagined and planned in your head.

16. Mind reading

Mind reading is when you assume you know what others are thinking, without them telling you. You believe you can determine how people feel about you or know their judgments, motivations, and beliefs with only limited evidence. For example, you think your partner is mad at you because they seem quiet.

17. Heavenly reward fallacy

You expect your sacrifice and self-denial today will pay off with a reward later. With this thinking, you believe if you suffer now, it will lead to a positive outcome down the road. For example, you may stay stuck in an unhappy marriage, convinced it will lead to a peaceful life later on.

18. Entitlement

You believe you deserve special treatment, privileges, or exemptions from normal rules and limitations. With this distortion, you overestimate your rights and underestimate what you owe to others. For example, you might expect to skip a line because you’re in a hurry, or feeling entitled to have your spouse handle chores you consider beneath you.

19. Cognitive conformity

With this distortion, you avoid thinking differently from your family, friends, colleagues, or society in order to fit in. It also means you may be unable to see other perspectives that are not held by your peer group. For example, feeling pressured to get married by 30 since all your friends are married.

20. Victim mentality

You consistently see yourself as a victim of circumstance or the negative actions of others. With this distortion, you blame outside forces (things you can't control) for setbacks rather than taking personal responsibility for things you can control. For example, thinking that "I can't succeed because the system is rigged against people like me."

21. Self-serving bias

You tend to attribute positive events or outcomes to your own actions and abilities, while blaming negative events or failures on external factors or circumstances beyond your control. You take credit for successes but deflect responsibility for failures. For example, "Our team won because of my crucial contributions," but if you lose, it's because "the other players didn't perform well."

22. Underestimating coping abilities

You consistently downplay your capacity to handle difficult situations or overcome challenges. You tend to believe that you can't cope with stress, adversity, or negative emotions, often catastrophizing potential outcomes. For example, thinking that "If I lose my job, I'll never be able to recover financially or emotionally."

23. Self-licensing

When you use a past accomplishment or sacrifice to justify indulgence in the present. With this distortion, you feel entitled to relax your normal rules and boundaries after doing something positive. For example, you might rationalize avoiding your diet after eating very healthily all week.

24. Neglecting opportunity cost

You focus solely on the immediate choice at hand without considering the long-term consequences of your decision. When you say "no" to something, you reject that one thing. When you say "yes" to something, you say "no" to all the other things you could have done. For example, buying an expensive car without considering how that money could be invested for long-term financial security.

10 Strategies for Challenging Cognitive Distortions

1. Identify the distortion

Write down your negative thoughts so you can see which of the cognitive distortions you're involved in. This will make it easier to think about the problem in a more positive and realistic way.

2. Examine the evidence

Instead of assuming that your negative thought is true, examine the actual evidence for it. For example, if you feel that you never do anything right, you could list several things you have done successfully.

3. The double-standard method

Instead of putting yourself down in a harsh, condemning way, talk to yourself in the same compassionate way you would talk to a friend with a similar problem.

4. The experimental technique

Do an experiment to test the validity of your negative thought. For example, if, during the episode of panic, you become terrified that you're about to die of a heart attack, you could jog or run up and down several flights of stairs. This will prove that your heart is healthy and strong.

5. Thinking in shades of grey

Instead of thinking about your problems in all-or-nothing extremes, evaluate things on a scale of 1 to 10. When things don't work out as well as you hoped, you can view the experience as a partial success rather than a complete failure. Think in terms of what you can learn from the situation.

6. The survey method

Ask people questions to find out if your thoughts and attitudes are realistic. For example, if you believe that public speaking anxiety is not normal, ask several friends if they ever felt nervous before they gave a talk.

7. Define terms

When you label yourself "inferior" or "a fool" or "a loser" ask, "What is the definition of a 'fool?'" You will feel better when you see that there is no such thing as a "fool" or a "loser."

8. The semantic method

Simply substitute language that is less colourful and emotionally loaded. This method is helpful for “should statements.” Instead of telling yourself, “I shouldn't have made that mistake,” you can say, “It would be better if I hadn't made that mistake.”

9. Re-attribution

Instead of automatically assuming that you are “bad” and blaming yourself entirely for a problem, think about the many factors that may have contributed to it. Focus on solving the problem instead of using up all your energy blaming yourself and feeling guilty.

10. Cost-benefit analysis

List the advantages and disadvantages of a feeling (like getting angry when your plane is late), a negative thought (like “No matter how hard I try, I always screw up”), or a behaviour pattern (like overeating and lying around in bed when you're depressed). You can also use the Cost-Benefit Analysis to modify a self-defeating belief such as, “I must always try to be perfect.”