



## *Recognizing Unhelpful Thinking with a Cognitive Distortion Log*

### Theory

As we have established, the distinguishing characteristic of CBT is its focus on the importance of our perceptions in interpreting situations. In this TIP we delve a bit deeper into unhealthy thinking habits with the notion of *cognitive distortions*. Conceptualized by psychiatrist Aaron Beck in the 1960s, this is one of the most central features of CBT.

The idea underlying cognitive distortions is that thought patterns that twist or misinterpret reality result in emotional distress. By recognizing the specific type of distortion, you can then attempt to objectively change your thinking patterns. This TIP includes some of the common types of cognitive distortions that lead to depressive thinking. In this list, you will notice common thought habits that many people don't even question. Focusing on these negative habits can be a very important tool in your CBT toolbox.

### Implementing Skills

The following is a list of common cognitive distortions that cause considerable emotional distress, perpetuating the downward spiral into depression and anxiety. Notice how these common distortions are extreme, absolute, and not grounded in fact. Each distortion is accompanied by examples applied to typical real-life situations. Since this chapter addresses depression, the examples show how cognitive distortions are often self-downing and applied to one's own self-view, leading to feelings of depression.

This list is by no means exhaustive, and in the activity that follows, you will write some of your own habitual distortions and examples.

### *Common Cognitive Distortions*

- **All-or-nothing-thinking:** Viewing things in black and white, blowing things out of proportion.
  - "I can't do anything right."
  - "Nobody likes me."
  - "Nothing ever goes right for me."
- **"Should" statements:** Judgmental and unforgiving statements that are rigid and inflexible.
  - "I should have known better."
  - "I should be further along in my life by now."
  - "I should not be so sensitive."

- **Fortune telling:** Thinking you can predict the future based on the way you are thinking now.
  - “I will never get over this.”
  - “I will be alone the rest of my life.”
  - “I never will be able to feel truly happy.”
- **Jumping to conclusions:** Assuming things are facts based on little evidence.
  - “She didn’t call me back—she must not like me.”
  - “He wasn’t honest with me—I can never trust him again.”
  - “I screwed up this relationship—I am not capable of having a healthy one.”
- **Mental filtering:** Focusing on the negative aspects of something and ignoring the positive.
  - “My legs are heavy, which makes my figure unattractive.”
  - “My teenager got a detention; I failed as a parent.”
  - “I got a C on that assignment—I am such a bad student.”
- **Discounting the positive:** Not only ignoring the positive aspects of something but actively rejecting them (similar to mental filtering but more extreme).
  - “I have some good friends at work, but the new hire didn’t want to join me for lunch. I feel completely unlikable.”
  - “I am a terrible actor! Even though I got praise for my performance, the reviewers were just being nice. I am sure they could tell I stammered and messed up some of my lines.”
  - “I got a couple of bad evaluations, which makes all the positive ones not important.”
- **Labeling:** Categorizing yourself (or others) unfairly in generalizing ways.
  - “I’m just stupid.”
  - “I’m unlovable.”
  - “I’m just a jerk.”
- **Comparing:** Comparing yourself unfavorably with others, which lowers your sense of self-worth.
  - “My teammates are so much better at soccer than me.”
  - “I feel so stupid compared to him.”
  - “She seems to have it all together and it makes me realize how inferior I am.”
- **Minimization:** Failing to respect your feelings and even your competence.
  - “So many people have it worse—I feel guilty for feeling this way.”
  - “It should not be so important to me—I’m just a stickler.”
  - “He probably is complimenting me on my work since he just likes to make people feel good even if they don’t earn it.”

- **Emotional reasoning:** Assuming that your feelings are evidence of the truth.
  - “I feel defective, so I must be defective.”
  - “I feel awkward around him—he must not like me.”
  - “I feel anxious walking here in the city, so it must be dangerous for me.”
- **Blaming and personalization:** Unfairly assigning all the guilt and responsibility to others (blaming) or to yourself (personalization), when the situation really involved other factors.
  - “He makes me so mad.”
  - “She ruined my life.”
  - “It’s all my fault that our work team is stressed out. I let them down.”

### *Now It’s Your Turn*

Consider the following examples. Then, in the template on the next page, identify some of your own thinking errors and reframe each error in a less extreme, more rational way.

<b>Irrational Thought</b>	<b>Type of Cognitive Distortion</b>	<b>Healthier Alternative Thought</b>
I will never recover from this breakup.	All-or-nothing thinking Fortune telling Emotional reasoning	I will work on getting over the breakup although it will be tough.
I am pathetic.	Labeling All-or-nothing thinking Emotional reasoning	I am in pain right now, but I will work on developing skills to think more clearly. I am worthy.
I should be further in my life by now. I haven’t accomplished anything and I blame only myself.	“Should” statements All-or-nothing thinking Minimization Discounting the positive Blaming	I have had setbacks, but I have learned from them and will be wiser moving forward.

### **Processing the Activity**

Recognizing, reframing, and restructuring your cognitive distortions can be one of the most useful tools you have to combat depressive thinking. As you work on replacing interpretations with facts, try to notice the type of distortion that is exaggerating your negative spin on things. By being an objective observer of your thoughts, you will reap the benefits of clearer thoughts to brighten your mood.



“I will be more careful in the things I say to myself and stick to the facts rather than my self-downing interpretations.”

## *My Cognitive Distortion Log*

Irrational Thought	Type of Cognitive Distortion	Healthier Alternative Thought