

COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS EXAMPLES

Examples of 15 Common Cognitive Distortions that Influence Your Thinking Patterns



1. POLARIZED THINKING

A student who gets an A- on an exam feels like a failure because they are used to getting A+ grades only. They have the mentality, "If I am not successful at everything I do, I am a complete failure".



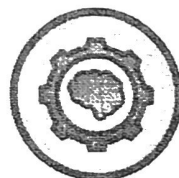
2. MENTAL FILTERING

NEGATIVE MENTAL FILTERING

An employee receives a good performance review but focuses on one negative comment their manager made about them.

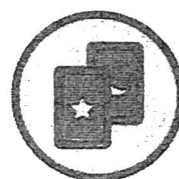
DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

A student gets a good grade but overlooks it and tries to explain their good grade as simply luck or fluke instead of hard work.



3. OVERGENERALIZATION

A student receives a bad grade on one exam, based on this they think they are stupid and a failure and believe that all future exams they will get a bad grade as well.



4. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

MIND READING

A friend you are spending time with seems distracted or uninterested. You jump to the conclusion it has to do with you.

FORTUNE TELLING

You have a date but you predict that the date will go bad. You make assumptions about the date before it has occurred.



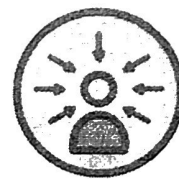
5. CATASTROPHIZING

MAGNIFICATION

A person's lunch date is running late and assumes the worst. Their worries escalate quickly & thoughts become exaggerated.

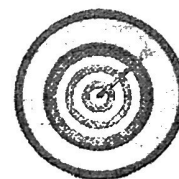
MINIMIZATION

An athlete wins an award but does not acknowledge their accomplishment. They minimize the importance of the award.



6. PERSONALIZATION

You attend a party but all your friends are busy engaging with other people. You feel like they do not have any interest in being your friend and engaging in conversation with you. This makes you think you don't belong or are unfairly excluded.



7. BLAMING

Placing blame for relationship issues on your partner instead of sharing the responsibility for actions taken by both partners. You assume the victim mentality and think everything they do is to hurt you.



8. LABELING

You ask a colleague for help with a task you are working on. Your colleague quickly dismisses your attention and does not help you. Based on this you assume they are a selfish jerk. They react negatively to you asking for help but you do not realize the pressure and stress they are under.



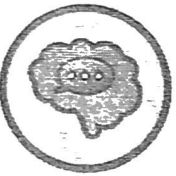
9. ALWAYS BEING RIGHT

Two people at work have a disagreement. One person believes it should be done their way because that's how it's always been done. But the other argues based on facts that there are industry-standard procedures that need to be followed. The person completely ignores these facts and argues their opinion to any extent.



10. SHOULD STATEMENTS

Statements like, "I should be exercising more," create expectations that are not likely to be met. The pressure created from the "should" statements makes it difficult to meet those expectations and when the failure occurs there is guilt and frustration which makes you less likely to make another attempt.



11. EMOTIONAL REASONING

You might feel lonely because at this moment you are by yourself and your friends are off doing something fun. However, from this feeling, you assume no one loves you or wants to be around you.



12. CONTROL FALLACIES

EXTERNAL CONTROL FALLACY

A person cheats on their partner when they leave they feel it's the person's fault and fail to see their actions were the cause.

INTERNAL CONTROL FALLACY

A coworker made a mistake on a task. You feel guilty and responsible because you reviewed their work and missed it.



13. FALLACY OF CHANGE

A person might pressure their partner to change a few of their manners. They believe their partner is perfect in every other way except those few minor things and expects those changes will make them even happier.



14. FALLACY OF FAIRNESS

A person who struggles with low income might feel anger and resentment towards others who make more money than them. They might feel that they work just as hard if not harder than other people but are not rewarded the same.



15. HEAVEN'S REWARD FALLACY

You were expecting to get a promotion this year because of your hard work. You believe you worked harder than the rest of your colleagues but you didn't get the promotion. You feel resentment because you believe you should have been rewarded for your hard work.

CHALLENGE

COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

How to challenge 15 common cognitive distortions with examples of reframed thoughts



1. POLARIZED THINKING

CHALLENGE:

- Avoid thinking in extremes
- Don't choose either/or extremes
- Identify how to be less extreme and more flexible
- Think in shades of gray
- Find the middle ground

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

I received an A- on an exam when I am typically used to receiving A+ grades only, I feel like a failure.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

I didn't do as well on the exam as I had hoped. But an A- is still a really good grade and I am grateful for it.



2. MENTAL FILTERING

NEGATIVE MENTAL FILTERING

CHALLENGE:

- Don't dwell on a single negative
- Focus on all positives that occurred during the situation
- Reflect on the entire situation
- Identify both positive & negative aspects

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

I received my employee performance review, but I can't stop thinking about one negative comment my manager made about me.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

I was lacking in one area of my review, but I performed well in other aspects of my job, and my manager did praise me for a great work ethic.

DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

CHALLENGE:

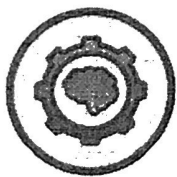
- Value positive aspects as much as negative ones
- Take pride in accomplishments
- Embrace compliments or positive feedback
- Cultivate an attitude of gratitude

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

I received a good mark on my assignment, but it's probably a mistake. I'm pretty sure it was just luck or fluke, I don't normally get good grades.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

I received a good mark on my assignment. I am grateful to receive this grade and am proud of what I accomplished.



3. OVERGENERALIZATION

CHALLENGE:

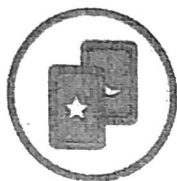
- Believe you can create different outcomes in the future
- Reflect when a single negative had a long-lasting impact
- Identify evidence that suggests it will impact future events

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

I failed this exam, I feel like such a failure. I don't think I am smart enough to take this class, I will probably just fail it.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

I didn't pass this one exam, but in the past, I have always found a way to come back from a failed exam. I will work harder and try again the next time.



4. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

MIND READING

CHALLENGE:

- Ask yourself if you are sure you actually know what someone is thinking
- Investigate your assumptions
- Identify logical reasons that contributed to the situation

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

I visit a friend, but her expression towards me seems negative. She doesn't want to see me. She claims she was sick, but I feel like she is avoiding me.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

She could be really sick and wants rest. Other reasons why she wouldn't want to see me: self-conscious about her appearance or worried she is contagious.

FORTUNE TELLING

CHALLENGE:

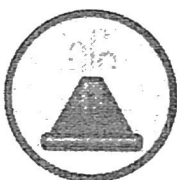
- Ask yourself how do you know what will actually happen
- Is there evidence to suggest it
- How often have you been accurate in the past

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

I'm going to have a bad day today.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

Today may have some challenges, but I will overcome them and have a good day.



5. CATASTROPHIZING

MAGNIFICATION

CHALLENGE:

- Take the negative event for what it is
- Don't make it any more than it is
- Look for opportunities rather than the catastrophic event

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

There is a lot of traffic on my way to work, I'm never going to get there on time.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

I may be late, but I will get there safely, in the meantime, I can enjoy the radio.

MINIMIZATION

CHALLENGE:

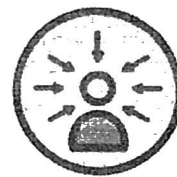
- Take positives for what it is
- Try not to diminish the importance of positive qualities and turn it into a negative
- Embrace positive experiences & take pride in accomplishments

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

As an athlete, I win an award, but it doesn't seem like I accomplished much as others have already won this award.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

I won an award, I am proud of what I accomplished and grateful for how far I have come in my athletic career.



6. PERSONALIZATION

CHALLENGE:

- Identify why you feel responsible
- Determine if you were in control
- Acknowledge it is rarely one person's fault
- Brainstorm logical reasons rather than blaming yourself

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

My partner and I show up late to a dinner party. Everyone seemed mad and not having a good time because we showed up late. I Should have left earlier.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

Even though we were late, I cannot control how people feel. There could be other factors that contributed to people not enjoying the party before arriving.



7. BLAMING

CHALLENGE:

- Avoid playing victim role
- See from other's perspective
- Recognize blame does not always fall on one person
- Take responsibility for your role
- Identify solutions and move on

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

I blame my significant other for the relationship issues we experienced. Why am I always treated this way, only if they put more effort into our relationship.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

A relationship takes two people to make it work. I am equally responsible for the issues we may have. I should apologize for my mistakes and move forward.



8. LABELING

CHALLENGE:

- Remember labels are the result of an error or mistake
- Attribute the error to the event instead of yourself or others
- One failure does not define you, separate this from labels

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

Someone at work made a mistake that had severe consequences for other tasks. Why are people so stupid, now I have to redo everything.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

I understand mistakes can happen. I will spend extra effort to fix it, but it's not the end of the world. I know they are capable of doing a better job next time.



9. ALWAYS BEING RIGHT

CHALLENGE:

- It is acceptable to be wrong
- Mistakes are allowed to happen
- Be open-minded to other's suggestion
- Try and identify if your thoughts are facts or opinions

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

I didn't agree with the way a task was being performed. I told them how to do it, I don't know why they won't listen to me. It should be done my way.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

I don't really know which method is better until I try it for myself. Maybe we can go with their method this time and see how it works out.



10. SHOULD STATEMENTS

CHALLENGE:

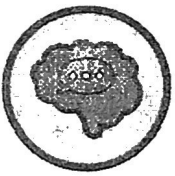
- Identify how it makes you feel
- These statements should be motivating rather than conflicting
- Use the word prefer in place of should

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

I should stop being lazy and exercise today.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

I would prefer to exercise today. But I'm not feeling up for it today. If I don't exercise today, I can exercise the next day.



11. EMOTIONAL REASONING

CHALLENGE:

- Let yourself feel emotions
- Be mindful without judgement
- Avoid letting emotions become truths
- Challenge the validity of feelings and identify if it is based on facts

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

I feel alone and uncared for because my partner does not want to spend time with me and instead is working overtime.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

My partner is working overtime because they are busy at work. Not because they do not care for me. When they are not busy they spend time with me.



12. CONTROL FALLACIES

EXTERNAL CONTROL FALLACY

CHALLENGE:

- Look for opportunities in small changes before big ones
- Recognize you cannot control everything
- Identify things in your control and things out of your control

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

I feel overwhelmed and anxious due to the coronavirus pandemic. I feel like I have no control to protect myself or my family from the virus.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

I recognize I cannot control how the virus spreads but I can reduce the risks by protecting myself, such as face masks and washing my hands regularly.

INTERNAL CONTROL FALLACY

CHALLENGE:

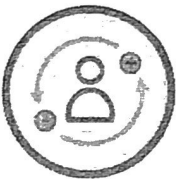
- Recognize you can't control everything around you
- Think whether your actions actually contributed to it
- Is there someone else that needs to take responsibility

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

My daughter failed her exam. I blame myself because I think I should have spent more time helping her study.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

Maybe she failed her exam because it was really difficult, not because I am a bad parent. I can offer to help, but it is her decision to put more effort.



13. FALLACY OF CHANGE

CHALLENGE:

- Recognize no one is responsible for your own happiness
- Separate the change from your own happiness
- Your happiness depends on yourself and the actions you take

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

I feel my partner is perfect in every other way except these few minor things. If I make them change those things, it will make me so happy.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

I can suggest those changes, but I understand that it isn't necessary to make me happy. If they choose not to change I'll still be happy with the way they are.



14. FALLACY OF FAIRNESS

CHALLENGE:

- State feelings as a preference rather than an expectation
- Identify what you don't have control over
- Consider other factors and be grateful for what you do have

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

A friend of mine makes a lot more money at their job doing something similar to me. Why don't I make the same amount, it's not fair they get paid more.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

I might not make as much money, but I am grateful for the job I have. There could be many reasons why I don't make as much.



15. HEAVEN'S REWARD FALLACY

CHALLENGE:

- Recognize not every sacrifice you make will be rewarded
- State feelings as a preference rather than an expectation
- Separate it from the sacrifice
- Consider other factors

EXAMPLE THOUGHT:

A colleague was promoted over me, but I believe I worked harder and deserved that promotion.

REFRAMED THOUGHT:

It would have been nice to get a promotion, but I can't control other's decisions. I can let my boss know of my hard work, maybe I will be considered next time.

Validating Feelings about You

One of the greatest challenges of good communication is validating the feelings someone has about you. When someone has a negative feeling toward us our first impulse is usually defensiveness. It makes sense that we would feel defensive because rarely do we do something with the intention of hurting someone else.

In order to respond to such feedback it is useful to make the distinction between the **intention** you had and the **impact** of your actions on someone else. Intent does not always equal impact. Only *you* know what your *intention* really was. Only *others* know what your *impact* on them really was.

Good communication can be defined as creating the impact that you intend. In order to communicate well, you have to be willing to listen to ways that your impact may have varied from your intent. Such feedback can help you make the proper corrections. Often, however, your first impulse may be to defend your-self. Consider the following example:

Customer: *Where's my car! I've got to go! It's supposed to be ready by now! It's been an hour!*

Tire Salesperson: *You have to give us some leeway on our estimated time for a job!*

The customer here may feel that the salesperson is invalidating her feelings. If so, she may insist that her anger is justified and an argument may ensue.

Validating someone's feelings about you requires that you temporarily quell your impulse to explain yourself. Internally you may respect your intent and hold yourself blameless. Meanwhile, you focus your attention on what the other person felt and try to find something in your actions that could plausibly set off the feelings they describe. For example, our tire salesperson could say:

Tire Salesperson: *Our estimate was off. I can see how that would be upsetting if you're in a hurry.*

It is helpful to acknowledge what you did or said that sparked someone's feelings toward you. You do not, however, have to hold yourself accountable for the full intensity of their response. Your actions may have simply triggered strong feelings from their past. Pointing this out to someone, however, is likely to make them defensive unless you cop to your own involvement first. If you validate your contribution to their feelings they are often freed to look more closely at their own contribution.

After you have validated someone's feelings about you and allowed some time for those feelings to release, you can explain what your intention was without appearing defensive. Here are a few examples of the difference between defensiveness, reflective listening, and validation:

Example A:

Sister #1: *Jackie! You pig! The pie is almost all gone!*

Sister #2 (defensive): *I didn't eat it all!*

Sister #2 (reflective): *You're angry about how much pie I ate.*

Sister #2 (validating): *Oh. I wasn't keeping track of how much I was eating. But if I had more than my share it makes sense that you'd be pissed.*

Example B:

Child: *This is a drag. You never take us anywhere fun.*

Dad (defensive): *What do you mean! What about last weekend!*

Dad (reflective): *You are bored with what we are doing.*

Dad (validating): *I can see how it might get pretty boring just hanging around here all day.*

In both cases the validating response goes beyond the reflective response to include the message that the feelings expressed are understandable. The validating response thus addresses the unconscious question, "Are my feelings okay?" Because the need to be validated is so universal among people, those who gain proficiency at this skill can become very popular indeed.