

## Common Cognitive Distortions



Our circumstances don't define us. Regardless of what happens in life, we always have the power to choose our attitude. So what's the difference between someone who remains hopeful despite experiencing great suffering and the person who stubs his or her toe and remains angry the rest of the day? The answer lies in the person's thinking patterns.

[Psychologists](#) use the term "cognitive distortions" to describe irrational, inflated thoughts or beliefs that distort a person's perception of reality, usually in a negative way. Cognitive distortions are common but can be hard to recognize if you don't

know what to look for. Many occur as automatic thoughts. They are so [habitual](#) that the thinker often doesn't realize he or she has the power to change them. Many grow to believe that's just the way things are.

Cognitive distortions can take a serious toll on one's mental health, leading to increased [stress](#), [depression](#), and [anxiety](#). If left unchecked, these automatic thought patterns can become entrenched and may negatively influence the rational, logical way you make decisions.

For those looking to improve their mental health by recognizing pesky cognitive distortions, we've compiled a list of 20 common ones that may already be distorting your perception of reality:

### 1. BLACK-AND-WHITE THINKING

A person with this dichotomous thinking pattern typically sees things in terms of either/or. Something is either good or bad, right or wrong, all or nothing. Black-and-white thinking fails to acknowledge that there are almost always several shades of gray that exist between black and white. By seeing only two possible sides or outcomes to something, a person ignores the middle—and possibly more reasonable—ground.

### 2. PERSONALIZATION

When engaging in this type of thinking, an individual tends to take things personally. He or she may attribute things that other people do as the result of his or her own actions or behaviors. This type of thinking also causes a person to blame himself or herself for external circumstances outside the person's control.

### 3. 'SHOULD' STATEMENTS

Thoughts that include "should," "ought," or "must" are almost always related to a cognitive distortion. For example: "I should have arrived to the meeting earlier," or, "I must lose weight to be more attractive." This type of thinking may induce feelings of [guilt](#) or [shame](#). "Should" statements also are common when referring to others in our lives. These thoughts may go something like, "He should have called me earlier," or, "She ought to thank me for all the help I've given her." Such thoughts can lead a person to feel frustration, [anger](#), and bitterness when others fail to meet unrealistic expectations. No matter how hard we wish to sometimes, we cannot control the behavior of another, so thinking about what others should do serves no healthy purpose.

### 4. CATASTROPHIZING

This occurs when a person sees any unpleasant occurrence as the worst possible outcome. A person who is catastrophizing might fail an exam and immediately think he or she has likely failed the entire course. A person may not have even taken the exam yet and already believe he or she will fail—assuming the worst, or preemptively catastrophizing.

### 5. MAGNIFYING

With this type of cognitive distortion, things are exaggerated or blown out of proportion, though not quite to the extent of catastrophizing. It is the real-life version of the old saying, "Making a mountain out of a molehill."

### 6. MINIMIZING

The same person who experiences the magnifying distortion may minimize positive events. These distortions sometimes occur in conjunction with each other. A person who distorts reality by minimizing may think something like, "Yes, I got a raise, but it wasn't very big and I'm still not very good at my job."

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### 7. MINDREADING

This type of thinker may assume the role of psychic and may think he or she knows what someone else thinks or feels. The person may think he or she knows what another person thinks despite no external confirmation that his or her assumption is true.

### 8. FORTUNE TELLING

A fortune-telling-type thinker tends to predict the future, and usually foresees a negative outcome. Such a thinker arbitrarily predicts that things will turn out poorly. Before a concert or movie, you might hear him or her say, "I just know that all the tickets will be sold out when we get there."

### 9. OVERGENERALIZATION

When overgeneralizing, a person may come to a conclusion based on one or two single events, despite the fact reality is too complex to make such generalizations. If a friend misses a lunch date, this doesn't mean he or she will always fail to keep commitments. Overgeneralizing statements often include the words "always," "never," "every," or "all."

### 10. DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVE

This extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking occurs when a person discounts positive information about a performance, event, or experience and sees only negative aspects. A person engaging in this type of distortion might disregard any compliments or positive reinforcement he or she receives.

**Thought patterns can be changed through a process referred to in cognitive therapy as cognitive restructuring. The idea behind it is that by adjusting our automatic thoughts, we are able to influence our emotions and behaviors.**

### 11. FILTERING

This cognitive distortion, similar to discounting the positive, occurs when a person filters out information, negative or positive. For example, a person may look at his or her feedback on an assignment in school or at work and exclude positive notes to focus on one critical comment.

### 12. LABELING

This distortion, a more severe type of overgeneralization, occurs when a person labels someone or something based on one experience or event. Instead of believing that he or she made a mistake, people engaging in this type of thinking might automatically label themselves as failures.

### 13. BLAMING

This is the opposite of personalization. Instead of seeing everything as your fault, all blame is put on someone or something else.

### 14. EMOTIONAL REASONING

Mistaking one's feelings for reality is emotional reasoning. If this type of thinker feels scared, there must be real danger. If this type of thinker feels stupid, then to him or her this must be true. This type of thinking can be severe and may manifest as [obsessive compulsion](#). For example, a person may feel dirty even though he or she has showered twice within the past hour.

### 15. ALWAYS BEING 'RIGHT'

This thinking pattern causes a person to internalize his or her opinions as facts and fails to consider the feelings of the other person in a debate or discussion. This cognitive distortion can make it difficult to form and sustain [healthy relationships](#).

### 16. SELF-SERVING BIAS

A person experiencing [self-serving bias](#) may attribute all positive events to his or her personal character while seeing any negative events as outside of his or her control. This pattern of thinking may cause a person to refuse to admit mistakes or flaws and to live in a distorted reality where he or she can do no wrong.

### 17. 'HEAVEN'S REWARD' FALLACY

In this pattern of thinking, a person may expect divine rewards for his or her sacrifices. People experiencing this distortion tend to put their interests and feelings aside in hopes that they will be rewarded for their selflessness later, but they may become bitter and angry if the reward is never presented.

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### 18. FALLACY OF CHANGE

This distortion assumes that other people must change their behavior in order for us to be happy. This way of thinking is usually considered selfish because it insists, for example, that other people change their schedule to accommodate yours or that your partner shouldn't wear his or her favorite t-shirt because you don't like it.

### 19. FALLACY OF FAIRNESS

This fallacy assumes that things have to be measured based on fairness and equality, when in reality things often don't always work that way. An example of the trap this type of thinking sets is when it justifies [infidelity](#) if a person's partner has cheated.

### 20. CONTROL FALLACY

Someone who sees things as internally controlled may put himself or herself at fault for events that are truly out of the person's control, such as another person's [happiness](#) or behavior. A person who sees things as externally controlled might blame his or her boss for poor work performance.

## HOW TO CHANGE THINKING PATTERNS AND COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

For many, one or more of these cognitive distortions will look familiar. You may fall into one or more of these traps or know someone who does. The good news is that cognitive distortions don't have to weigh you down like an anchor.

Thought patterns can be changed through a process referred to in cognitive therapy as cognitive restructuring. The idea behind it is that by adjusting our automatic thoughts, we are able to influence our emotions and behaviors. This is the basis of several popular forms of therapy, including [cognitive behavioral therapy \(CBT\)](#) and [rational emotive behavioral therapy \(REBT\)](#).

If you feel that one or more of the above cognitive distortions is contributing to feelings of anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues, we encourage you to consider [finding a qualified therapist](#) you trust to work with you and help transform your negative thoughts and beliefs into empowering affirmations that inspire and uplift you.

### References:

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