

Cognitive Distortions¹

Distortion	Definition	<i>Stress-related Examples - can you think of others?</i>
1. All-or-nothing thinking	You see things in black-or-white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.	<i>You have been practicing cued relaxation for two weeks. Your son gets into a fight at school and you have to go in to have a discussion about him with the principal. Your body and mind are in an uproar, and you can't relax. You conclude that you will never be able to manage your stress, much less your son.</i>
2. Overgeneralization	You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat, or as proof of the ongoing nature of the event.	<i>A car splashes slush on you as you are cleaning your windshield. You think, "Why am I the only one who always gets splashed?"</i>
3. Mental Filter	You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that colors the entire beaker of water.	<i>You receive one criticism on an otherwise well-written term paper. You ignore your grade of A- and your instructor's positive comments, and you wonder if your understanding of the subject is so poor that you should consider changing your major.</i>
4. Disqualifying the positive	You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or other. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.	<i>Normally afraid of talking in public, you give a presentation in class that is well received, and during the talk you are energized by the response of the class. Rather than taking this as evidence that <u>can</u> talk in public, you attribute it to having to spend ten times more on preparation than anyone else.</i>
5. Jumping to conclusions	You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion	
	a. Mind reading. You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don't bother to check this out.	<i>A classmate walks by you without saying "hi." You conclude that she doesn't like you, and you now feel a bit fearful of her reaction if you speak to her the next time you see her.</i>
	b. The Fortune Teller Error. You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is already a well-established fact.	<i>Your job interview goes badly; the interviewer interrupts you and picks an argument with you over something you say. You don't get the job. You conclude that you are bad at doing interviews and wonder if you will ever be able to get a job.</i>

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6. Magnification (catastrophizing) or minimization	You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up or someone else's achievement), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other fellow's imperfections). This is also called the "binocular trick." (<i>looking at life through binoculars - magnifying or minimizing everything you see</i>)	<i>You overdraw your checking account, and worse yet, your bank charges you \$75 for the three checks that bounced. You are terrified that your credit rating has been ruined for life.</i>
7. Emotional Reasoning	You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true."	<i>You tell yourself, "My messy desk discourages me; I'll never be able to clean it up and keep it neat," which lays the groundwork for procrastination. (You substitute your <u>feeling</u> of discouragement for the observation that some work will be required in order to clean up your desk)</i>
8. Should Statements	You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn'ts, as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. "Musts" and "Oughts" are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements towards others, you feel anger, frustration and resentment. <i>Albert Ellis refers to this as "musterbation," and says, "Don't SHOULD on yourself." David Burns calls this the "shouldy" approach to life."</i>	<i>I should spend more time with my husband.</i> <i>People should be more courteous on the road.</i> <i>My husband shouldn't leave his stuff lying all over the house.</i>
9. Labeling and mislabeling	This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a loser ." When someone else's behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him: "He's a goddam louse ." Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded. "Would you think of yourself exclusively as an "eater" just because you eat, or a "breather" just because you breathe?" (p. 40)	<i>When your child brings home a D, you conclude, "I'm a terrible mother."</i> <i>Your boss is not interested in hearing your excuses for being late, so you conclude "He's an insensitive jerk."</i>

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10. Personalization	You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event which in fact you were not primarily responsible for.	<p><i>Over-use of internal locus of control: You are involved in a car accident, caused by a tree suddenly falling into the roadway. You ruminate over all the things that you could have done to avoid the accident - leaving five minutes earlier or later, driving more slowly, driving another 50' further from the car in front of you, should have replaced your tires last week, etc. etc.</i></p> <p><i>You have a fight with your spouse. She storms out of the house, gets in a fight in a bar, and is arrested. You feel responsible for her arrest.</i></p>

*Try to think of alternative interpretations you can make of each situation, or alternative thoughts and responses that you can make. For example, in item (1), after you fail to keep your cool and remain relaxed in a difficult situation, you might conclude that you need to keep working on relaxation techniques, or try an alternative technique like yoga or brisk walking, in order to manage your stress - not that you will **never** be able to manage your stress.*

¹ Items 1-10 are quoted from Burns, D. D. (1999). *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy, Revised Ed.* pp 42-43 New York: Avon. *Items in italics are my additions or comments to these items.*