

Cognitive Therapy: Replace distorted thoughts with rational alternatives¹

For each “automatic” thought that is shown below, fill in an alternative response that represents rational thinking, not distorted thinking. Sample alternatives are on the reverse; don’t look until you’ve tried to answer them yourself.

Automatic, Distorted Thought	Type of Cognitive Distortion	Rational Alternative
This relationship is a complete disaster.	all-or-nothing thinking	
I’m falling apart. I can’t handle this workload.	catastrophizing (magnification and minimization)	
Things must really be awful for me to feel this way!	emotional reasoning	
This course is so difficult – I just know I’m going to flunk it!	jumping to conclusions	
Mary’s problems are all my fault!	personalization (mistaken responsibility)	
I’m just a loser, useless, a no-good.	labeling and mislabeling (name-calling)	
Someone my age should be further along than I am.	Shouldism	
It would be awful if I don’t get this job.	catastrophizing	
I know that if Marco got to know me, he really wouldn’t like me.	jumping to conclusions	
All I can think about is how difficult it’s going to be to go to college.	mental filter (negative focus)	

¹ Modified from Nevid, J (2007). *Psychology: Concepts and Applications, 2e*, p 560, 578. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin

Sample rational alternatives:

Automatic, Distorted Thought	Type of Cognitive Distortion	Rational Alternative
This relationship is a complete disaster.	all-or-nothing thinking	This relationship has problems that we need to work out; there are things we can do to make it better. (focus on positive steps)
I'm falling apart. I can't handle this workload.	catastrophizing (magnification and minimization)	I'm feeling overwhelmed right now, but I've gotten through tough times before, and I can break it down into steps and figure out how to get it all done. (focus on past success, positive steps)
Things must really be awful for me to feel this way!	emotional reasoning	Just because I feel this way doesn't make things so awful. How am I interpreting "things" and how does that interpretation link to my emotions?
This course is so difficult – I just know I'm going to flunk it!	jumping to conclusions	I'm having a lot of difficulty with this class so far; I can discuss it with my prof and see if I can get some help. (focus on positive steps)
Mary's problems are all my fault!	personalization (mistaken responsibility)	Mary has a lot of problems that have nothing to do with me. She directed blame at me only because I was "there." (stop taking blame for other people's problems - it's not always about you)
I'm just a loser, useless, a no-good.	labeling and mislabeling (name-calling)	I haven't been doing well, and I may need to see a counselor to try to find better approaches. (Stop blaming yourself; focus on steps you can take to improve your situation or responses.)
Someone my age should be further along than I am.	Shouldism	Some of my peers are earning more than I am, but that is not important because I'm doing well and I'm happy with my career and my life. (Don't "should" on yourself; do your best and stop comparing yourself to others.)
It would be awful if I don't get this job.	catastrophizing	I'd really like this job, but if I don't get it, I'll just continue applying. (It's awful only if you make it so. Focus on positive.)
I know that if Marco got to know me, he really wouldn't like me.	jumping to conclusions	I'd really like to get to know Marco better. (What evidence do you have he/she won't like you? Other people who know you like you. Focus on positive.)
All I can think about is how difficult it's going to be to go to college.	mental filter (negative focus)	I'm so excited about going to college! No doubt that there will be obstacles, but I can try to anticipate some, and deal with the others when they arise. (Focus on positive, and on what you can do to fix problems.)

Recommended reading: for more information on use of cognitive therapy and changing irrational, negative thinking patterns, see Burns, D. (1999) *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy Revised and Updated*. New York: Avon. (paperback)