

# Cognitive Distortions & Examples

\*This list of Cognitive Distortions is sourced from: Burns, David D., MD. 1989. The Feeling Good Handbook. New York: William Morrow and Company

\*The examples of each type are my own and based off ideas from my work experience

**1.) ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING: You see things in black-and-white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.**

“I try so hard, but I always mess up. I am not good enough” (not only do you raise the bar to impossible standards, but you think imperfection means not good enough).

You’ve been in a stressful season of life and decide “I hate my life” even though 80% of your life is as you wanted it, and only about 20% of it is hard these days.

**2.) OVERGENERALIZATION: You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.**

“I was uncomfortable at parent-teacher meetings. I am so socially awkward.”

“My boyfriend broke up with me; I’m not loveable.”

**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 discolors the entire beaker of water.**

I had a hard time finishing an important exam and decide it means “I’m a loser and I’m never going to manage to finish my degree.”

A critical email from your boss sends you spiraling into shame not only about your performance at work but also who you are as a person.

**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.**

You’ve made many purposeful choices over the years to build a good life but think “I’m just making this up as I go, I don’t deserve this.”

Someone pays you a compliment but you deflect, thinking “that was nothing, I was just doing what anyone would do.”

**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.**

Every time your friend Jennifer doesn't respond within a day or two to your text you think "I've done something to turn her off; she's pulling away from me."

Your teenager is distracted and spending extra time in their room and you make up a story about how they're depressed and struggling, without asking them what's up or giving them some space to want alone time like you yourself need at times.

**B.) FORTUNE TELLING: You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact.**

"I'm too late to the game; I'm never going to get this business off the ground."

"Because of the pandemic I'm going to lose my house!" (while your brain spins a story of how this event will ultimately turn out).

**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 other fellow's imperfections). This is also called the "binocular trick."**

"Everyone else has their life figured out and they don't struggle like I do" (you don't see behind the scenes and you tend to downplay their pain or struggle in life).

"I'm broken" (you are simply human, messy like everyone else, but turn your common humanity into a story about how you're too messed up for a full, beautiful life).

**7.) EMOTIONAL REASONING: You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true."**

"My friends are tired of me needing support – I don't even blame them."

"No one likes me at church – I don't fit in."

**8.) SHOULD STATEMENTS: You try to motivate yourself with should and shouldn't, 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 consequences are guilt. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.**

"Everyone should be following the rules! They're so irresponsible!" (without allowing for the truth that you don't actually know the full truth behind anyone else's actions).

"I should be a better parent – I should know how to do this better/know how to parent better/more easily."

**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 damn louse.” Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.

“I felt criticized by my mom the other day – she has never truly loved me and thinks I’m a failure.”

I was passed up for a promotion – “he’s a total racist/homophobe/misogynist!” (without any actual evidence of this or knowledge of this person’s character or life beyond my limited scope).

**10.) PERSONALIZATION:** You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event, which in fact you were not primarily responsible for.

“It’s my fault my brother died – I missed the warning signs.”

“If I hadn’t pushed my husband to go on a date, we wouldn’t have been in wrong the place at the wrong time when the shooting started.”

A few articles to read for further understanding:

[10 Proven Methods for Fixing Cognitive Distortions](#)

[What Are Cognitive Distortions and How Can You Change These Thinking](#)

[Cognitive Distortions: When Your Brain Lies to You \(+ PDF Worksheets\)](#)