

Cognitive Distortions or Assumptions

All or Nothing Thinking:

You think of things in “black-or-white” or rigid categories. If something is less than perfect, you see it as a total failure.

e.g. You get nine A’s and one B on your report card. You believe this a terrible report card.

Over Generalizing:

You think of a single negative event as a never-ending pattern.

e.g. You stumble on your way into work and believe you are a clumsy, stupid loser.

Mental Filtering:

You dwell on a single negative detail, and ignore moderate or positive things that may occur.

e.g. You mispronounce one word in a speech, yet you receive many unsolicited praises from your colleagues for the same speech. You ignore the praise and view it as a total failure.

Disqualifying the Positive:

You reject positive experiences, ...“they don’t count”. You maintain a negative view in spite of contradictory evidence.

e.g. Several colleagues ask you for tips on delivering good speeches, telling you they want to emulate your excellent public speaking ability. You still believe that your shortcomings outweigh your abilities, and distrust your colleagues’ motives for asking you for help.

Mind Reading:

You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and don’t bother to check this out with them.

e.g. A party guest is looking elsewhere as you are talking to her. You assume she is bored and wants to get away from you, so you leave. (Another friend later tells you that the party guest was hoping to exchange phone numbers with you, liked you very much and wonders why you left so abruptly).

Fortune Telling:

You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and feel convinced that your prediction is a fact.

e.g. You turn down a party invitation, convinced that no one would be interested in talking to you anyway.

Catastrophizing:

You believe the worst-case scenario will happen.

e.g. Someone turns you down for a date. You are convinced you will lead a life of loneliness.

Magnifying or Minimizing:

You exaggerate the importance of certain things (such as your mistakes or other’s successes) and minimize other things (such as your own desirable qualities or other’s imperfections).

Emotional Reasoning:

You assume that the way you feel reflects the way things are.

e.g. You feel inadequate and fatigued, and assume that things are useless and require too much effort.

“Shoulds”:

You believe you must live up to certain perfectionist expectations. You may have perfectionist expectations of others.

e.g. I must do this, or I am inadequate. (“Shoulds” directed at yourself may result in guilt feelings.)

e.g. They must do this, or they are inadequate. (“Shoulds” directed at others may result in anger or resentment.)

Labeling/Mislabeled:

“Over-Generalizing”. Instead of describing an error, you attach a negative, generalized label to yourself/others.

e.g. Instead of recognizing that you made a small error, you label yourself a “Loser”.

Personalization:

You see yourself as responsible for events around you that you had little/no responsibility for.

e.g. A woman behind you at a store knocks over a display, and you apologize for possibly contributing to the incident.

Maladaptive Thought:

Any belief you have that is not useful to you in a given situation.

(Maladaptive thoughts are excessive in nature and are not substantiated by external evidence).

Compensatory Misconceptions:

The belief that you need to inflate your achievements to be socially successful.

e.g. Telling people you graduated from Harvard, when you did not. Believing that you are inadequate as you are.

Adapted from: Cognitive Distortions (1999). The Shyness Institute, 4370 Alpine Road, Portola Valley, CA 94028