

Cognitive distortions are thoughts that affect everyone, but in their extreme form, they can negatively affect the way we interact with others and view our experiences. Often identified as “irrational and biased,” they are actually self-protective ways of looking at things that often lead to and/or exacerbate negative emotional and behavioral states, resulting at times in self-sabotage. Think of them as an extension of your fight or flight response, that is designed to keep you (emotionally) safe. When you are not in a threatening situation, those survival skills can inhibit your ability to thrive. Below you will find some of the most common cognitive distortions:

- **Splitting/Polarized Thinking:** To look at things dichotomously, such as right/wrong, true/false, good/bad, rather than the nuances or totality of a situation or person.
- **“Yeah But”-ing:** Focusing on the negatives, ignoring or diminishing the positives, or insisting positives “don’t count.”
- **Overgeneralizing:** To come to a general conclusion based on one or a few incidents or pieces of evidence, viewing a negative event to be evidence that it will happen again and again.
- **Mind Reading:** Claiming to know what someone else’s motives or intentions were, how they are thinking, feeling, and acting the way they do without confirmation from the individual.
- **Catastrophizing:** Predicting/Expecting things will go badly, resorting to “what if’s,” or spinning into worst case scenario.
- **Magnifying and Minimizing:** To blow things out of proportion or to shrink their importance disproportionately.
- **Blaming:** To blame others for 100% of the “problem” rather than taking ownership of our part or to take 100% of the blame without acknowledging someone else’s part. It is also blaming others for your emotional pain, such as “They **hurt** my feelings” or “They **made** me mad.”
- **Should-ing:** To criticize oneself or others using language such as should/shouldn’t,” “must,” “ought to,” or “have to.” An ironclad yet of subjective list of rules about how you and others *should* act, how things *should* go and how things *should* be, implying judgment.
- **Guilt v. Shame:** To mistake an error in behavior for your value as a person.
- **Personalizing:** Interpreting others’ behaviors or words as a direct, personal reaction to you.
- **Emotional Reasoning:** Assuming that our negative emotions accurately reflect the truth. For example, “My feelings are hurt therefore you meant to hurt my feelings or what you said was wrong.” It is possible for us to be hurt by someone without their intending to hurt us, or by words that are true or a valid perspective.

- **Control Fallacies:** Feeling *externally* controlled, identifying as helpless, the victim of fate, unable to solve/avoid problems. Feeling *internal* controlled, you feel responsible for the pain and happiness of everyone around you.
- **Have To/Can't Fallacy:** Mislabeled a choice as something one "has to" or "can't" do "X", rather than recognizing the behavior as avoidance of the consequences of not doing "X."
- **Fallacy of Change:** An effort or belief that, if pressured enough, people will change to suit them, based on the belief that one's happiness or success is dependent on others changing.
- **Fallacy of Fairness:** Resentment due to the belief you know what's fair but experience or other people disagree or don't follow those expectations. The belief that one's opinions or actions are right and as a result, behave defensively or aggressively to prove it or convince others.
- **Heaven's Reward Fallacy:** The false belief that sacrifice and self-denial *should* pay off, as if there were a universal score keeper, then becoming angry, bitter or resentful when there is no pay off.

Cognitive Restructuring

This skill requires us to shift away from distorted thinking by challenging our own thoughts. Here are techniques that can support you in decreasing distorted thinking and move beyond "survival mode."

1. **Identify the Cognitive Distortion:** Identifying your own patterns, or "go to" distortions is important. That can be done through daily tracking, as well as in the moment. If you are suffering from a thought, there is likely a distortion present.
2. **Find the Threat:** If cognitive distortions are self-protective thinking styles that lead to self-sabotage, we can identify what the threat is, or what harm we fear will come if the distortion wasn't believed.
3. **Take the Observer Role:** When we are a participant, or have "a dog in the fight," we can feel threatened and not see things neutrally. Oftentimes, that results in thinking things like, "I give great advice, I just don't take my own!" Either ask a friend or identify what you would say to a friend or colleague in your situation. Seeking out others' thoughts and input can help put our thoughts and attitudes in perspective.
4. **Monster Under the Bed:** This can be helpful for catastrophizing or asking "what if?" Play out the worst-case scenarios to see if the "what if" scenarios are as anxiety producing as we believe, and as a result of this step, we can reduce self-sabotaging or anxious thoughts.
5. **Thinking in Grey:** Shifting away from dichotomous thinking, considering the "middle" rather than just the polar ends of the spectrum, you might find something in the middle that feels *more true*.
6. **Goaltending:** There also can be times when we want to argue about "right and wrong." This is when you can identify your goal and ask yourself if your thoughts, feelings, and actions are effectively moving you in the right direction to meet that goal. Oftentimes we find that being right or wrong is actually quite irrelevant to your goal.

7. **Semantics Matter:** Our words matter; when we find ourselves using negative (self) talk, consider re-phrasing to a more true or positive substitute.

8. **Cost Benefit Analysis:** A cost-benefit analysis will help to figure out what a person is gaining from feeling bad, distorted thinking, and inappropriate behavior. "How does it help me to believe this thought, and how will it hurt me?" If you find the disadvantages of believing a thought outweigh the advantages, you'll find it easier to talk back and refute the irrational belief.