

## What Are Cognitive Distortions?

Which came first: the chicken or the egg? Which came first: the depression or the pessimistic thoughts? I can't answer the first question, but the answer to the latter may surprise you.

- *All-or-Nothing Thinking:*

Statements that use absolute terms such as always, never, completely, totally or perfectly to suggest you are a failure if your performance falls short of these standards. e.g., "You're nobody as a writer until you've won a Pulitzer Prize.

*Example:* John recently applied for a promotion in his firm. The job went to another employee with more experience. John wanted this job very badly and now feels that he will never be promoted. He feels that he is a total failure in his career.

- *Overgeneralization:*

The use of a single negative event as evidence for a never-ending pattern of negative events. e.g., "Lisa said she didn't have time for coffee with me yesterday ... I'll never get a date with her."

*Example:* Linda is very lonely and often spends most of her time at home. People sometime suggest that she should get out and meet people. Linda feels that that is it useless to try to meet people. She believes that no one really could like her.

- *Mental Filter or Selective Negative Focus*

This is focusing on the negative aspect of a situation while ignoring the positive. e.g., A student who fails the oral part of an exam but passes the written with an 'A' says, "I really messed up that exam."

*Example:* Mary is having a bad day. As she drives home, a kind gentleman waves her to go ahead of him as he merges into traffic. Later in her trip another driver cuts her off. She grumbles to herself that there is nothing but rude and insensitive people in her city.

- *Disqualifying the Positive:*

This is a rejection of positive experiences by insisting they “don’t count”. e.g., A student who fails the oral part of an exam but passes the written with an ‘A’ says, “I usually do well on written exams, that’s not what is important to me.”

*Example:* Rhonda just had her portrait made. Her friend tells her how beautiful she looks. Rhonda brushes aside the compliment by saying that the photographer must have touched up the picture. She never looks that good in real life.

- *Jumping to Conclusions:*

This happens when negative interpretations are made of events without sufficient supporting evidence.

- Fortune telling occurs as unfounded, usually dire predictions that are made as if they are already fact. e.g., A student who is overwhelmed with registering for her first year of college says, “I probably won’t get any of my course selections.”
- Mind-reading is a prediction about other people’s thoughts or behaviors that is made without checking it out. It sometimes represents the projection of one person’s thoughts/feelings onto another person. e.g., “He must think I’m lazy for cutting the class.”

*Example:* Chuck is waiting for his date at a restaurant. He’s now 20 minutes late. Chuck laments to himself that he must have done something wrong and now she has stood him up. Meanwhile across town, his date is stuck in traffic.

- *Magnification and Minimization:*

This is also referred to as the “binocular trick” because it happens when we enlarge our shortcomings or someone else’s accomplishments while shrinking our accomplishments or someone else’s shortcomings. e.g., “I’m not ½ the man my brother is. Everything he touches seems to turn to gold.”

*Example:* Scott is playing football. He bungles a play that he's been practicing for weeks. He later scores the winning touchdown. His teammates compliment him. He tells them he should have played better; the touchdown was just dumb luck.

- *Emotional Reasoning:*

This is mood-state dependent thinking based on the assumption that feeling something strongly necessarily makes it true. e.g., "If I am feeling anxious, I must be doing a poor job."

*Example:* Laura looks around her untidy house and feels overwhelmed by the prospect of cleaning. "This is hopeless", she says to herself. "Why should I even try?"
- *Should Statements:*

These are statements that suggest a desire to change some reality when the only real choice is between accepting or not accepting it. e.g., "The boss should show greater appreciation for the hard work I do."

Note: Not all should statements contain the word "should". e.g., "Why does Jake always have to arrive late for appointments?"

*Example:* David is sitting in his doctor's waiting room. His doctor is running late. David sits stewing thinking, "With how much I'm paying him he should be on time. He ought to have more consideration." He ends up feeling bitter and resentful.
- *Labeling and Mislabeled:*

This is an extreme form of over-generalization whereby a negative & usually emotionally charged label is attached to a person on the basis of a relatively isolated or insignificant behavior. e.g., A person who says something offensive after having a few drinks is called a "drunk".

*Example:* Donna just cheated on her diet. "What a fat pig I am!", she thinks.
- *Arbitrary Inference:*

This involves drawing unwarranted connections between ideas that are either not logically related or are related in a much different way than is being suggested.

*Example:* "I've had so many bad relationships with men, I always seem to pick the same type. There must be something wrong with me."

- *Personalization:*

This happens when we interpret an event or a situation as having special meaning (usually negative) for only ourselves. e.g., "If I hadn't hired on with this company, they never would have gone bankrupt."

*Example:* Jean's son is doing poorly in school. She feels that she must be a bad mother. She feels that it's all her fault that he isn't studying.

If you recognize any of these behaviors in yourself, then you're halfway there. Here's a homework assignment for you. Over the next couple of weeks, begin to watch yourself closely for self-defeating ways that you respond to situations. Practice recognizing your automatic responses. Now, we will take each of the above Cognitive Distortions and discuss some powerful coping strategies that will help you dispel the blues before they even start.

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## **Strategies to Beat Your Negative Thoughts**

*All-or-Nothing Thinking:* John recently applied for a promotion in his firm. The job went to another employee with more experience. John wanted this job very badly and now feels that he will never be promoted. He feels that he is a total failure in his career.

This type of thinking is characterized by absolute terms like "always", "never", and "forever". Few situations are ever this absolute. There are generally gray areas. Eliminate these words from your vocabulary except for the cases where they truly apply and look for a more accurate description of the situation. Here's how John could have coped with not getting that promotion:

"I wanted this job very much, but it went to someone with more experience. This is disappointing to me, but it doesn't mean I'm not a good employee. There will be other opportunities available in the future. I'll keep working on my skills so that I'll be ready for them when they arrive. This one setback does not mean my career is over. Overall, I have excelled in my work."

*Overgeneralization:* Linda is very lonely and often spends most of her time at home. People sometimes suggest that she should get out and meet people.

*Linda feels that that is it useless to try to meet people. No one really could like her. People are all mean and superficial anyway.*

When one overgeneralizes, one takes an isolated case or cases and assumes that all others are the same. Are people really all mean and superficial and could never like her? What about her friends who are trying to get her to go out? Obviously she does have someone who cares about her very much. The next time you catch yourself overgeneralizing, remind yourself that even though a group of people may share something in common, they are also separate and unique individuals. No two people are exactly the same. There may be mean and superficial people in this world. There may even be people who dislike you. But not every single person will fit this description. By assuming that everyone doesn't like you, you are building a wall that will prevent you from having what you crave the most--friendship.

*Mental Filter:* *Mary is having a bad day. As she drives home another driver cuts her off. She grumbles to herself that there is nothing but rude and insensitive people in her town. Later a kind gentleman waves her go ahead of him. She continues on her way still angry at how rude all the people in her city are.*

When a person falls victim to mental filters they are mentally singling out only the bad events in their lives and overlooking the positive. Learn to look for that silver lining in every cloud. It's all about how you choose to let events effect you. Mary could have turned her whole day around if she had paid attention to that nice man who went out of his way to help her.

*Disqualifying the Positive:* *Rhonda just had her portrait made. Her friend tells her how beautiful she looks. Rhonda brushes aside the compliment by saying that the photographer must have touched up the picture. She says she never looks that good in real life.*

We depressives are masters at taking the good in a situation and turning it to a negative. Part of this comes from a tendency to low self-esteem. We feel like we just don't deserve it. How to turn this around is actually very simple. Next time someone compliments you resist that little voice inside that says you don't deserve it. Just say "thank you" and smile. The more you do this the easier it will become.

*Jumping to Conclusions:* *Chuck is waiting for his date at a restaurant. She's now 20 minutes late. Chuck laments to himself that he must have done something*

*wrong and now she has stood him up. Meanwhile across town his date is stuck in traffic.*

Once again, we fall victim to our own insecurities. We expect the worst and begin preparing early for the disappointment. By the time we find out that all our fears were unfounded we've worked ourselves into a frenzy and for what? Next time do this: *give them the benefit of the doubt*. You'll save yourself a lot of unnecessary worry. If your fears have some basis in reality, however, drop that person from your life like a hot potato.

*Magnification and Minimization:* *Scott is playing football. He bungles a play that he's been practicing for weeks. He later scores the winning touchdown. His teammates compliment him. He tells them he should have played better; the touchdown was just dumb luck.*

Ever looked through a telescope from the wrong direction? Everything looks tinier than it really is. When you look through the other end everything looks larger. People who fall into the magnification/minimization trap look at all their successes through the wrong end of the telescope and their failures through the other end.

What can you do to stay away from this error? Remember the old saying "he can't see the forest for the trees"? When one mistake bogs us down, we forget to look at the overall picture. Step back and look at the forest now and then. Overall Scott played a good game. So what if he made a mistake?

*Emotional Reasoning:* *Laura looks around her untidy house and feels overwhelmed by the prospect of cleaning. This is hopeless, she says to herself. Why should I even try?*

Laura has based her assessment of the situation on how it makes her *feel* not how it really is. It may make her feel bad to think of the large task ahead of her, but is it really hopeless? In reality, cleaning her house is a very doable task. She just doesn't feel up to doing it. She has reached the conclusion that it is useless to try based upon the fact that it makes her feel overwhelmed.

When a situation feels overwhelming, try this. Break down the task down into smaller ones. Then prioritize what is most important to you. Now, do the first task on your list. Believe it or not, you will begin to feel better and ready for more. The important thing is to just do *something* towards your goal. No matter how small, it's a start and will break you out of feeling helpless.

Should Statements: *David is sitting in his doctor's waiting room. His doctor is running late. David sits stewing thinking "With how much I'm paying him he should be on time. He ought to have more consideration." He ends up feeling bitter and resentful.*

We all think things *should* be a certain way, but let's face it, they aren't. Concentrate on what you can change and if you can't change it accept it as part of life and go on. Your mental health is more important than "they way things should be."

Labeling and Mislabeled: *Donna just cheated on her diet. What a fat pig I am, she laments. I'll never be thin and pretty.*

What Donna has done is label herself as lazy and hopeless. She most likely will reason that since she can't lose weight she may as well eat. She has now effectively trapped herself by living up to the label she placed on herself. When we label ourselves we set ourselves up to become whatever that label entails. This can just as easily work to our advantage.

Here's what Donna could have done to make labeling work in her favor. She could have considered the fact that up until now she has been very strong, much stronger than the average person because she is fighting against one of our body's basic needs--to eat. She could then forgive herself for only being human and acknowledge that she has been working very hard to lose weight and has been succeeding. This is only a temporary setback that she can overcome. She is overall a very strong person and has proven it by her successful weight loss. With this type of positive thinking, Donna will be back "on the wagon" in no time.

Personalization: *Jean's son is doing poorly in school. She feels that she must be a bad mother. It's all her fault that he isn't studying.*

Jean is taking all the responsibility for how her son is doing in school. She is failing to take into consideration that her son is an individual who is ultimately responsible for himself. She can do her best to guide him, but in the end it is he who controls his actions. Next time you find yourself doing this, ask yourself, "Would I take credit if this person were doing some praiseworthy? Chances are you'd say," no, he accomplished that by himself". So why blame yourself when he does something not so praiseworthy? Beating yourself up is not going to change his behavior. Only he can do that.

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The solutions presented here are some of the common situations we find ourselves in. Take these as examples and create your own positive solutions to your negative thoughts. Recognizing that you do it is the first step. Then play devil's advocate and challenge yourself to find the positive. Turn your thoughts around and your moods will follow suit. Remember, you are what you think!