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Cognitive distortions involve negative thinking patterns that aren’t based on fact or reality. You can help change these thinking patterns to promote your mental well-being. Share on PinterestTwenty20“I have the worst luck in the entire world.”“I just failed that math test. I’m no good at school and might as well quit.”“She’s late. It’s raining. She has hydroplaned, and her car is upside down in a ditch.”These are all prime examples of cognitive distortions: thought patterns that cause people to view reality in inaccurate — usually negative — ways.In short, they’re habitual errors in thinking. When experiencing a cognitive distortion, the way you interpret events is usually negatively biased.Most people experience cognitive distortions from time to time. But if they’re reinforced often enough, they can increase anxiety, deepen depression, cause relationship difficulties, and lead to other complications.Learn more about cognitive distortions, including their connections to mental health, the types, and what you can do to help change your thought patterns. Cognitive distortions are types of thinking patterns that emphasize negative biases. Mental health professionals first described them in the late 1970s and early 1980s.Research from 2017 suggests that people may develop cognitive distortions to cope with adverse life events. The more prolonged and severe those adverse events are, the more likely it is that one or more cognitive distortions will form. Human beings might even have developed cognitive distortions as an evolutionary survival method.In other words, experiencing stress could cause you to adapt your thinking in useful ways for immediate survival. But these thoughts often aren’t rational or healthy long-term. In the 1960s and 1970s, psychiatrist Aaron Beck pioneered research on cognitive distortions in his development of a treatment method known as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT is a type of psychotherapy mental health professionals use to teach clients how to overcome individual reactions (whether emotional, physiological, or behavioral) to a given situation, which may influence their interpretations of the actual situation itself. Today, CBT is still considered a key method to help individuals transform distorted thinking. When you’re convinced that you’re either destined for success or doomed to failure, that the people in your life are either angelic or evil, you’re probably engaging in polarized thinking. This kind of distortion is unrealistic and often unhelpful because reality often exists between the two extremes. When people overgeneralize, they reach a conclusion about one event and then incorrectly apply that conclusion across the board. In other words, you might assume that one negative event means every subsequent event thereafter will be negative too. For example, you score low on one math test and conclude that you’re hopeless at math in general. You may have a negative experience in one relationship and then believe that you just aren’t good at relationships. This distorted thinking leads people to dread or assume the worst when faced with the unknown — despite a lack of evidence supporting such predictions. When people catastrophize, ordinary worries can quickly escalate. For instance, an expected check doesn’t arrive in the mail. A person who catastrophizes may begin to fear it will never arrive and that, as a consequence, it won’t be possible to pay rent, and the whole family will be evicted. It’s easy to dismiss catastrophizing as a “hysterical” overreaction. Still, people who have developed this cognitive distortion may have experienced repeated adverse events — like chronic pain or childhood trauma — so often that they fear the worst in many situations. One of the most common errors in thinking is taking things personally when they’re not connected to or caused by you at all. You may be engaging in personalization when you blame yourself for circumstances that aren’t your fault, or are beyond your control.Another example is when you incorrectly assume that you’ve been intentionally excluded or targeted. Personalization has been associated with heightened anxiety and depression. When people assume they know what others are thinking, they’re resorting to mind reading. With this cognitive delusion, you may also assume that others are thinking negative thoughts about you.It can be hard to distinguish between mind reading and empathy — the ability to perceive and understand what others may be feeling. To tell the difference between the two, it might be helpful to consider all the evidence, not just the evidence that confirms your suspicions or beliefs. At least one study found that mind reading is more common among children than adolescents or adults and is associated with anxiety. This distorted thought pattern involves the tendency to ignore positives and focus exclusively on negatives. This is known as mental filtering.Interpreting circumstances using a negative mental filter is inaccurate and can also worsen anxiety and depression symptoms. Researchers have found that having a negative perspective of yourself and your future can cause feelings of hopelessness. These thoughts may become extreme enough to trigger suicidal thoughts. Like mental filters, discounting the positive involves a negative bias in thinking. As the name suggests, discounting the positive essentially means that you either dismiss or ignore positive events.People who tend to discount the positive don’t ignore or overlook something positive. Instead, they explain it away as a fluke or sheer luck.Instead of acknowledging that a good outcome results from skill, smart choices, or determination, they assume that good results must be an accident or anomaly. When people believe they have no control over their circumstances, it can reduce motivation and cultivate a sense of “learned helplessness.”When people find themselves thinking in terms of what “should” and “ought” to be said or done, it’s possible that a cognitive distortion is at work. It’s rarely helpful to chastise yourself with what you “should” be able to do in a given situation. “Should” and “ought” statements are often used by the thinker to take on a negative view of their life.These types of thoughts are often rooted in internalized family or cultural expectations that might not be appropriate for an individual. Such thoughts can diminish your self-esteem and raise anxiety levels. Emotional reasoning refers to the false belief that your emotions are the truth — and that the way you feel about a situation is a reliable indicator of reality. While it’s important to listen to, validate, and express emotion, it’s equally important to judge reality based on rational evidence. Researchers have found that emotional reasoning is a common cognitive distortion. It’s a pattern of thinking used by people with and without anxiety or depression.Labeling is a cognitive distortion in which people classify themselves in a negative way following an undesirable event. For example, they might reduce themselves or other people to a single — usually negative — characteristic or descriptor, such as a “failure.” When people label, they define themselves and others based on a single event or behavior.Labeling can cause people to berate themselves. It can also cause the thinker to misunderstand or underestimate others. This misperception can cause problems between people.The good news is that cognitive distortions can be corrected over time. Here are some steps you can take if you want to change thought patterns that may not be helpful:When you realize a thought is causing anxiety or dampening your mood, a good first step is to figure out what kind of distorted thinking is taking place. To better understand how your thoughts affect your emotions and behavior, you may want to consider reading “Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy” by clinical psychologist Dr. David Burns. This book is considered by many to be the definitive work on this subject.Look for shades of gray, alternative explanations, objective evidence, and positive interpretations to expand your thinking. You might find it helpful to write down your original thought, followed by three or four alternative interpretations.People usually repeat behaviors that deliver some benefit. You might find it helpful to analyze how your thought patterns have helped you cope in the past. Do they give you a sense of control in situations where you feel powerless? Do they allow you to avoid taking responsibility or taking necessary risks? You can also ask yourself what engaging in cognitive distortion costs you. Weighing the pros and cons of your thought patterns could motivate you to change them.CBT is a widely recognized form of talk therapy in which people learn to identify, interrupt, and change unhealthy thinking patterns. If you’d like some guidance in identifying and changing distorted thinking, you might find this type of therapy useful.CBT usually focuses on specific goals. It generally takes place for a predetermined number of sessions and may take a few weeks to a few months to see results.Look for a therapist who’s properly certified and licensed in the state where you live. Your therapist should be trained in CBT. Cognitive distortions are habitual ways of thinking that are often inaccurate and negatively biased. Cognitive distortions usually develop over time in response to adverse events. Researchers have identified at least 10 common distorted thinking patterns. If you’re ready to tackle a cognitive distortion, you may want to try some of the methods found in cognitive behavioral therapy. This type of therapy has been successful in helping people identify cognitive distortions and retrain themselves to look at the world in a clearer, more rational way.Healthline has strict sourcing guidelines and relies on peer-reviewed studies, academic research institutions, and medical journals and associations. We only use quality, credible sources to ensure content accuracy and integrity. You can learn more about how we ensure our content is accurate and current by reading our editorial policy.Beck JS, et al. (2021). A brief history of Aaron T. Beck, MD, and cognitive behavioral therapy. SP, et al. (2022). Cognitive behavior therapy. JE, et al. (2015). Fear generalization and anxiety: Behavioral and neural mechanisms. 15)00318-2/fulltextFazakas-DeHoog LL, et al. (2017). A cognitive distortions and deficits model of suicide ideation. E, et al. (2017). Cognitive distortions in patients with social anxiety disorder: Comparison of a clinical group and healthy controls. S. (2016). Learned helplessness. C, et al. (2017). Do cognitive distortions explain the longitudinal relationship between life adversity and emotional and behavioural problems in secondary school children? . (2021). K, et al. (2016). Cognitive distortions, humor styles, and depression. JS, et al. (2015). Negative cognitive errors in youth: Specificity to anxious and depressive symptoms and age differences. Depending on how we interpret events, our minds can sometimes play tricks on us. They can convince us of things that aren’t true, even though they feel rational to us. When these inaccurate beliefs influence our thoughts, emotions, and actions, we can feel anxious, stressed, angry, or depressed about ourselves (or the world around us). These faulty beliefs are known as cognitive distortions. What Are Cognitive Distortions? Anyone can experience cognitive distortion, which the American Psychological Association defines as “faulty or inaccurate thinking, perception or belief.” Negativity is often the defining characteristic. For some of us, distorted thinking is a momentary blip. We get upset when we fail a math test. We briefly reason that we’re bad at math, instead of realizing we need to study more. But we typically move on and try again. For others, cognitive distortions are a pattern of thinking that interferes with their lives and relationships. In these cases, distorted thinking can lead to chronic anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems such as misuse of substances. The 10 Most Common Cognitive Distortions Let’s review some common cognitive distortion examples. You might see your own thought patterns reflected here, or they may describe someone you know. You to expect the worst outcome in any situation. You often find yourself thinking, “What if…?” If your child misses curfew, you imagine he’s been in a car accident. If your boss schedules a meeting, you worry you’ll be fired. And your thinking spirals from there: You may think of losing your child. Getting fired means you’ll become homeless. Catastrophic thinking can lead to is closely related to and can be heavily influenced by depression and anxiety disorders. This type of thinking can lead to relationship straining behaviors or judgements. People engaging in catastrophic thinking might see everything as pointless. When something goes right — say you get a promotion — you acknowledge it but refuse to take credit. Instead, you chalk it up to dumb luck or a mistake. Or, you receive many positive comments on an evaluation, but choose to focus on a single piece of negative feedback. This kind of thinking can hurt a person’s sense of pride and self-esteem. Anxiety is associated with discounting positives. You rely on “gut” feelings over objective evidence to judge yourself and the world. For example, “I feel like a bad mother, therefore I must be a bad mother.” This kind of thinking can be harmful as it may lead to irrational decision making and judgements. Eating disorders and other behavior changes may come from emotional reasoning. You often define yourself and others with negative labels. In assigning labels, you focus on one past behavior or event. Your co-worker is “lazy” because they came to work late. You’re “stupid” because you failed the math test. Labeling and mislabeling can damage a person’s self-esteem and their view of other people. This thinking can have effects similar to depression. You view yourself, your life, and your future through a negative lens. You ignore anything positive. Filtering can increase feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Mental filtering can be linked to depression or suicidal thoughts. People exhibiting mental filtering might isolate themselves from others. You base your decisions not on what someone says or does, but on what you believe they’re thinking. You don’t ask what the other person thinks or feels. Mind-reading is a kind of jumping to conclusions where you fill in the gaps of your knowledge by assuming someone else’s thoughts. You believe you can read minds or anticipate reactions. This assumption may stem from one instance of being correct that makes you believing you always know what others are really thinking. Fortune-telling is another form of cognitive distortion related to jumping to conclusions. You insist you can predict the future, regardless of what you do. You’ll be famous without putting in the hard work. Or you’ll always be a failure, so hard work is a waste of time. People who overgeneralize apply their experience from one event to another. If your marriage ended in divorce, you think you’re not worthy of love. As a result, you might conclude you should never date again. Overgeneralizing can lead to damaged self-esteem and world view. If people often tell you, “stop taking this so personally,” then you likely experience personalization. You blame yourself for things outside of your control. You falsely believe that everything that someone says or does is a direct reaction to you. Personalization can convince you that you are being targeted or excluded. It can also cause you to compare yourself to others. This kind of thinking deals in extremes. People and situations are either great or terrible. You believe you’re either destined for success or failure. You don’t allow room for balanced perspectives or outcomes. You have a list of rules for how people should and shouldn’t behave. Constantly blaming yourself or others for what “should” have been said or done (but wasn’t) can increase stress and anxiety. You will never be happy if you always focus on what “should” have been. Challenging Cognitive Distortions Cognitive behavioral therapy is widely used to help break the cycle of distorted thinking. A trained psychotherapist can work with you to retrain your brain to identify and challenge cognitive distortions using thought records, cognitive restructuring exercises, and behavioral exercises. Identify the thought: Take a moment to examine and analyze your thought process that has led you to this conclusion. Do you have proof to support this thought? Are you drawing conclusions based on your feelings or on evidence? How might your own biases influence this conclusion? Reframe the thought: Try approaching your situation from a different perspective. Perhaps imagine the best possible outcome versus the worst possible outcome, versus what is most likely to happen. Consider why you think this way: Think about the conclusion you’ve made and if any of your preconceptions may have influenced this. Cognitive Behavior Therapy can help prevent cognitive distortions: Cognitive distortions are common and can be difficult to manage, however there are treatments such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to help. CBT is typically a short-term therapy solution that works to identify the troubling or traumatic situations in your life, increase your awareness of the thoughts and beliefs you hold regarding those situations as well as the negative or inaccurate thoughts surrounding them, and reshaping those thoughts to be more conducive to healthy thinking. This final step is the most difficult and can take time and practice to make your thoughts healthy and helpful. For more information on behavioral health services, call UPMC Western Psychiatric Hospital at 1-877-624-4100 or 412-624-1000. Editor's Note: This article was originally published on May 13, 2021, and was last reviewed on April 20, 2022.Andrea Wyssen. Relevance of the Thought–Shape Fusion Trait Questionnaire for healthy women and women presenting symptoms of eating disorders and mixed mental disorders. Clinical Psychology Psychotherapy. LinkDavid Berle. Does Emotional Reasoning Change During Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Anxiety? Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. Link Laura L. Fazakas-DeHoog. A Cognitive Distortions and Deficits Model of Suicide Ideation. Europe's Journal of Psychology. Link Melina Andrea del Pozo. Cognitive Distortions in Anorexia Nervosa and Borderline Personality Disorder. Psychiatry Research. LinkMohamad El Haj. False Memory in Alzheimer's Disease. Behavioral Neurology. LinkOlimpia Matarazzo. The Gambler's Fallacy in Problem and Non-Problem Gamblers. Journal of Behavioral Addictions. Link Depending on how we interpret events, our minds can sometimes play tricks on us. They can convince us of things that aren’t true, even though they feel rational to us. 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Editor's Note: This article was originally published on May 13, 2021, and was last reviewed on April 20, 2022.Andrea Wyssen. Relevance of the Thought–Shape Fusion Trait Questionnaire for healthy women and women presenting symptoms of eating disorders and mixed mental disorders. Clinical Psychology Psychotherapy. LinkDavid Berle. Does Emotional Reasoning Change During Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Anxiety? Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. Link Laura L. Fazakas-DeHoog. A Cognitive Distortions and Deficits Model of Suicide Ideation. Europe's Journal of Psychology. Link Melina Andrea del Pozo. Cognitive Distortions in Anorexia Nervosa and Borderline Personality Disorder. Psychiatry Research. LinkMohamad El Haj. False Memory in Alzheimer's Disease. Behavioral Neurology. LinkOlimpia Matarazzo. The Gambler's Fallacy in Problem and Non-Problem Gamblers. Journal of Behavioral Addictions. Link Let’s start by clarifying what cognitive distortions are. The short and direct answer is that cognitive distortions are errors that occur in one’s thinking process. They happen automatically, become cognitive patterns due to the context in which we grew up, and developed psychologically and emotionally. We’ve learned them somehow, and they have become our automatic responses to the outside world and can even be detected in the relationship we have with ourselves. One more thing: they are independent of our intelligence level. Smart people can exhibit cognitive distortions. It’s not a matter of lacking intelligence, but rather being blind to something attached to us so well that the need to observe it does not enter our awareness unless something specific happens. I would say that we start paying attention to our thought patterns either when we deliberately choose to go through a personal development process in a cognitive-driven manner or when the way we live our lives does not satisfy us anymore and we try to search for ways to change it. Once we learn that by changing our thinking we can trigger desirable changes in our lives, we focus on improving our cognition.Why should we learn to identify and manage cognitive distortions? The answer is quite simple. The way we think guides the way we relate to others, the world, and the way we perceive ourselves. When these relationships rest on distorted premises, they lack authenticity and mislead us when engaging in social interactions or when we perceive ourselves. Self-image and the image of the world around us may be distorted by these automatic thoughts. In short, the way we perceive reality is deformed by the occurrence of cognitive distortions. And why would one want to look at the world or themselves through a distorted lens? We can adjust this perception by identifying and managing cognitive distortions.I also find it useful to mention here the difference between cognitive distortions, cognitive dissonance, and cognitive bias.Cognitive distortion — Error in the thinking process, automatic thought, erroneous thought pattern. Different from logical fallacies.Cognitive dissonance — Occurs when two opposing thoughts reside in the same mind, generating inner conflicts and psychological distress. Cognitive dissonance is resolved by choosing one thought, idea, value, or belief over the other.Cognitive bias — Effects of our simplified patterns in information processing. They have to do with human limitations regarding mental processing. It’s a rather a subconscious process that generates them. They may be also guided by cognitive distortions. They can sometimes lead to a positive outcome (for example, they can shorten the time for decision-making).So here are ten of the most encountered cognitive distortions. They are often the subject of reformulation in cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy processes.Dichotomous ThinkingAlso known as polarized, black-or-white or all-or-nothing thinking. This cognitive pattern focuses on the extremes and excludes everything that’s in between. Things are either good or bad, children are seen as either smart or stupid, obedient or naughty, relationships are either perfect or a waste of time. Using the black-or-white system, when dichotomous thinking is on, one cannot see the gray areas. No nuances exist in a dichotomous mind. And we need nuances. Life is filled with them. We only seldom find pure contexts in the natural world, so we need to see and know how to work with nuances.OvergeneralizationConsider this pattern as taking the isolated and making it the rule. It’s like everything falls into only one category and nothing stands outside that group. Often verbalized through terms like “always”, “never”, “every time”, “everybody”. Examples: “All newspapers print lies”. This kind of formulation excludes the possibility of an honest newspaper. “You never do anything nice for me. You’re always late for dinner”. You’ve just dismissed any nice gesture the other one might have exhibited in the past toward you, and you’ve also generalized a behavior that may not be the rule when it comes to being punctual for dinner.The Mental FilterIt refers to defining a context through only one aspect and filter out everything else. We usually filter the positive from a context and keep the negative. We then tend to define the whole context by using the negative aspect, which may not have been determinant for the situation. Let’s say you give a public speech at the end of which you get many comments, good and critical. The negative mental filter would make you consider only the bad feedback and see the whole presentation as a failure.Disqualifying the positiveThis pattern resembles the mental filter, but this time you don’t filter out the positive, but consider it to be a result of chance or hazard. For example, when one gets a good result on a test. They would rather say that the exam was easy or the teacher was generous when grading the papers, rather than seeing it as the result of one’s learning efforts and intellectual abilities. Jumping to ConclusionsThis cognitive distortion refers to reaching a conclusion while having little or no evidence at all. This type of pattern has two subtypes: Mind-reading – where one assumes a person will react in a certain way before an event occurs (“I know that my boss wanted me to leave the room so he could talk to the other managers about firing me.”) and Fortune-Telling – where one assumes things will unfold in a particular way (“I know this relationship will end anyway, so why should I bother.”).Magnification and MinimizationRefers to considering things as having greater or less importance or meaning than they actually have. We usually tend to magnify the negative, the threat, the failure, the shortcomings and minimize the positive, the comfortable, the success, and the resources.Magnification means exaggerating the importance of certain aspects of a situation. When we consider the worst possible outcome as being the most valid result, we talk about catastrophizing, as a subtype of magnification or augmentation. “The plane didn’t land at the expected time. What if there’s been an accident?”Minimization implies assigning less significance to an aspect even though the evidence would show that these things bear more importance than that. Example: Minimization of danger. “There’s no use in locking my front door at night. This is a quiet, crime-free neighborhood.”Emotional ReasoningAssuming that if we feel a certain way about something, then that’s something specific for that context. Considering that our feelings or emotional responses to certain situations or things must show a characteristic of that thing or situation. “I’m afraid of skiing; therefore it must be a dangerous sport.”Also, when we feel overwhelmed by the prospects of a task, we tend to see that task as extremely hard or complicated and thus decide there is no sense in starting it at all. “I feel overwhelmed, so it must be complicated.”“Should” StatementsHas this happened to you? Once somebody assigned you a task or manifested an expectation — a teacher, a parent, a partner — you felt compelled to respond to it, even though you didn’t quite see the purpose in relation to your own structure, goals, or life? Does the imperative formulation echo in your mind, giving you the impression that you have to do it?If yes, then you’ve experienced the effect of “Should” statements. “You should be married by the time you’re thirty”, ” A good brother should always help his little sister”, “Good children obey” etc.These “shoulds”, especially when they don’t represent our own goals, aspirations, desires, or dreams, act as a stress factor in our lives. It’s the “tic-tac” you hear, although you feel you shouldn’t, the guilt that comes with not fulfilling the expectations others have of you. Cutting the “shoulds” from our lives could mean less stress and also allowing ourselves to live by our own standards, not what the world “thinks” we should be, become, or do.LabelingMeans judging ourselves or others based on one’s behavior, rather than what is characteristic of that person. “The behavior IS the person” versus “the behavior is just something the person did”. Example: “I made a mistake. Only losers make mistakes”. “Loser” is, therefore, a label.Personalization or BlamingIt’s about placing the whole responsibility onto one single source (that usually had nothing or little to do with the results of a situation). When we place responsibility exclusively on ourselves, it’s personalization, and when we assign it to others, it’s blaming.“It’s all my fault that you didn’t pass the exam. I shouldn’t have kept you so long on the phone yesterday.” – Personalization.“It’s all your fault that I’m sad. You never consider my feelings when you make such decisions.” – Blaming.Now that you have seen the list above, I imagine that you understand how all of these “little monsters” that (can) exist in our heads can cause us to have a flawed perception of reality regarding ourselves or others.There are several ways to help manage these cognitive distortions, but the first step is always identifying them. Being able to identify, analyze, diminish or eliminate cognitive distortions is an important part of Critical Thinking, a skill that I strongly support and recommend. Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation . No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Cognitive distortions are irrational thought patterns that distort reality and lead to negative thinking or emotions. These patterns of thought are often deeply ingrained and can significantly impact an individual’s worldview and emotional well-being (Reber, 2019). Cognitive distortions can become problematic when they are pervasive and negatively impact an individual’s daily life, influencing their behaviour and decisions. These maladaptive thought processes can be a considerable focus in various types of therapy, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, where the aim is to recognize and challenge these distortions. Identifying and understanding cognitive distortions is therefore critical for both mental health professionals and individuals seeking to improve their mental health. Despite cognitive distortions being common, they are often unnoticed due to their habitual nature, highlighting the importance of education and self-awareness. All-or-Nothing Thinking: This is a cognitive distortion where individuals perceive situations in absolute, black-and-white categories. For instance, if a student does not receive an ‘A’ grade, they may believe they’ve entirely failed. This distortion restricts their ability to see the various shades of gray in between the extremes. Overgeneralization: In this cognitive distortion, one isolated incident is perceived as a never-ending pattern of defeat. An individual who gets rejected once might use it to forecast an eternal future of rejections. This overgeneralization often leads to heightened feelings of despair. Mental Filtering: Filtering involves magnifying the negative aspects of a situation while filtering out all positive ones. A good example is a person who receives numerous compliments on a presentation but dwells on a single, slightly negative comment. They thus perceive the entire event as negative. Catastrophizing: Here, individuals expect the worst-case scenario to occur. For instance, someone may assume their slight cough is a symptom of a serious illness. Such irrational fears can create significant anxiety and prevent plausible risk assessments. Personalization: In personalization, someone assumes an excessive amount of blame for an adverse event. For instance, a mother whose teen child starts experimenting with harmful substances might blame herself entirely, believing it’s all her fault. It’s, therefore, a self-centered distortion, ignoring external contributing factors. Mind Reading: This cognitive distortion involves assuming we know what others are thinking without any real evidence. For instance, if a friend doesn’t text back promptly, someone might assume, “They must be upset with me.” This leads to misunderstanding and unnecessary worry as it ignores other plausible explanations for their friend’s behavior. Labeling: Labeling involves assigning a harsh label to oneself or others based on a single incident. An employee who makes a minor mistake might tell himself, “I’m useless.” This cognitive distortion simplifies complex realities, contributes to poor self-esteem, and inhibits personal growth. Magnifying or Minimizing: In this cognitive distortion, an individual amplifies the negative aspects while minimizing the positive ones. A musician might magnify one slight pitch error during a performance while minimizing the applause and praise they received. This leads to a skewed perception of events, often resulting in undue stress and negativity. Emotional Reasoning: Emotional reasoning involves making decisions and arguments based on how you feel rather than objective reality. A person feeling low might think, “I feel like a failure; therefore, I must be a failure.” Emotion does not always reflect reality, and relying solely on it can result in poor judgment and self-deceiving biases. Should Statements: This cognitive distortion is characterized by imposing a set of unrealistic expectations on oneself and others. For example, a person might frequently think, “I should always be productive,” leading to guilt when they relax. It’s a rigid way of thinking that can create unnecessary pressure and disappointment. Control Fallacies: This distortion involves feeling as if everything that happens is either a direct result of our actions or completely out of our control. For example, a person may believe that their happiness is solely dependent on their partner’s mood. This distortion leads to powerlessness or unjust self-blame, hindering personal growth and resilience. Fallacy of Fairness: Here, an individual feels resentful because they believe they understand what is fair, but other people do not agree with them. For instance, an employee might feel overworked and underpaid, believing “It’s not fair that I work so hard but get paid so little.” This distortion can lead to unexpressed resentment and a perpetual feeling of being short-changed. Fallacy of Change: This cognitive distortion is characterized by expecting others to change if we pressure or encourage them enough. For instance, a person might believe that if they nag their partner enough, their partner will become more organized. This often leads to frustration and disappointment when others fail to meet these imposed expectations. Always Being Right: In this cognitive distortion, being wrong is unthinkable and any evidence to the contrary is dismissed. For example, a person might argue relentlessly to justify their point of view, rejecting any opposition. This can damage relationships and prevent personal growth by shutting down new learning opportunities. Heaven’s Reward Fallacy: This involves expecting all sacrifices and self-denial to pay off as if there were a cosmic scorekeeper. Someone might think, “I always put others’ needs before mine, yet I never get anything good in return.” This distortion can lead to resentment and disillusionment when the expected reward does not materialize. Blaming: This cognitive distortion involves pointing the finger at others for one’s personal dissatisfaction or issues. For instance, one can blame a colleague for a project failure, ignoring their own responsibilities. This can lead to damaged relationships and hinder personal growth. Global Labeling: Here, an individual generalizes one or two qualities or events into a negative global judgment. For example, someone might label a friend who cancels plans as “flaky” which overshadows all other positive attributes. It leads to an oversimplified perspective of people and situations. Fortune Telling: This distortion involves predicting the worst possible outcome without factual evidence. An father might predict his child’s poor performance in a competition before it even starts. This cognitive distortion denies possibilities and contributes to anxiety. Regret Orientation: Regret orientation is when one focuses on the fact that present circumstances were caused by past choices and often fantasize about how things could have been. Such as wishing to have gone to a different school, this can lead to dissatisfaction and prevent them from appreciating their current circumstances. What if: This cognitive distortion involves asking a series of questions about “what if” something happens, and not being satisfied with any of the answers. For instance, a person might continuously wonder, “What if I lose my job?” This can lead to constant worry and hinder happiness. Negative Filtering: This involves taking the negative details and magnifying them while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation. For example, a person might focus on a single negative comment in a sea of compliments. This can lead to a pessimistic viewpoint and lower self-esteem. Over-categorization: This is when a person oversimplifies or reduces something or someone into a category or a classification. For instance, a student with one bad grade can result in viewing themselves as an academic failure. This can induce stress and dismiss the broader, more accurate view of themselves or the situation. Negative Prediction: This cognitive distortion involves an irrational belief in inevitable failure or disaster. For instance, a person might believe they’re sure to fail an exam despite studying. This can affect motivation negatively and heighten anxiety. Inability to Disconfirm: Here, an individual rejects any evidence or arguments which might contradict their negative thoughts. For instance, a person may deny that they are loved even when provided with clear demonstrations of affection. This distortion can persist negative perspectives and beliefs, rejecting change or improvement. Judgment Focus: This cognitive distortion is when a person sees themselves through a judgemental lens, frequently rating or comparing their actions or accomplishments to others. For example, someone might judge themselves for not buying a house at the same age as their parent did. This can lead to an unhealthy comparison, creating stress and self-esteem issues. Discounting Positives: In this cognitive distortion, individuals devalue or ignore positive experiences, insisting they “don’t count”. For example, a student who receives praise for their coursework might insist it was just “luck” not skill. This mindset undermines self-esteem and fosters negativity. Can’t Stand-itis: This is where a person sees discomforting situations as intolerable and feels they cannot stand it. For instance, when one faces a temporary power outage, they might think, “I can’t handle this!” This cognitive distortion can exaggerate minor inconveniences creating unnecessary distress. Stereotyping: This cognitive distortion involves generalizing characteristics to all members of a group. For example, believing that all lawyers are deceitful based on a single experience. This can lead to prejudiced attitudes and unfair judgement, fostering division or even discrimination. Dependency: This is when an individual believes that they cannot make it on their own and constantly need someone. For example, a person might think, “I can’t survive without my partner.” This can create an unhealthy reliance on others and can hinder personal growth. Negative Self-Comparison: This cognitive distortion involves comparing oneself to others and always falling short. If a neighbor gets a new car, for instance, one might feel inferior for not having a new car. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, and negatively impact self-esteem. Minimization: This involves belittling or undervaluing your own positive traits, achievements, or experiences. For instance, a person might dismiss their promotions at work as insignificant. This cognitive distortion can lead to lowered self-esteem and achievement. Self-Blame: This cognitive distortion involves habitually blaming oneself even when an event was largely out of their control. For example, a person might blame themselves for a friend moving away. This can heighten feelings of guilt and impede self-confidence. Negative Perfectionism: This involves setting unrealistically high, perfectionistic standards for oneself. A student might believe they are a failure if they do not always score 100%. This can set a person up for constant disappointment, contributing to low self-esteem and anxiety. Magical Thinking: This is where a person believes their thoughts can directly affect the world. For instance, if they think negative thoughts about a colleague, they might believe this leads to the colleague’s misfortune. This distortion can create unnecessary guilt and superstition. Dichotomous Thinking: This cognitive distortion involves viewing things in ‘either-or’ categories, with no middle ground. A person might believe that if they’re not thin, it means they’re fat, neglecting the spectrum of body types in between. Dichotomous thinking can lead to oversimplification of complex issues, creating a misguided perception. Cognitive distortions and cognitive biases are fundamentally distinct concepts, although there is a degree of overlap between the two (Bem & De Jong, 2013). Cognitive distortions refer to erroneous and irrational thought patterns that are thought to create and reinforce negative emotions and behaviors. They are primarily negative, encompassing various all-or-nothing thinking or catastrophizing patterns that warp one’s perception of reality (Miller, 2016). On the other hand, cognitive biases, while they might distort one’s perception of reality, are cognitive shortcuts or heuristics we use to speed up our thought processes. These biases are not necessarily negative – they can be neutral or even positive, but they can lead to systematic deviation from objective standards of judgement (Kassin, Privitera, & Clayton, 2022). For example, an individual experiencing a cognitive distortion might conclude, after failing a single test, that they are academically hopeless [Negative Filtering]. A cognitive bias, however, might be seen in an individual who pays more attention to news that supports their political beliefs and disregards contrary information [Confirmation Bias]. Importantly, while cognitive biases often impact our thought processes and can lead to flawed decision-making, cognitive distortions are heavily ingrained, automatic, and often contribute more significantly to serious mental health issues like depression and anxiety (Reber, 2019). Finally, while both cognitive distortions and cognitive biases require an element of self-awareness and intervention to correct, this is generally a more involved process for cognitive distortions, owing to their deeply entrenched, habitual nature (Crisp & Turner, 2020). In conclusion, both cognitive distortions and cognitive biases can significantly impact our perception and judgements, albeit in slightly different ways, and both require conscious effort to overcome. Cognitive distortions, while pervasive, can be addressed through various strategies. The first and one of the most effective strategies is Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and cognitive restructuring (Reber, 2019). CBT, often administered by a licensed therapist, consists of identifying and challenging these distortions, and replacing them with more accurate, balanced thoughts.

irrational patterns of thought. Cognitive distortions often begin to develop during childhood and are influenced by a person's experiences in their family, school, community, and culture. Statements from trusted adults or peers, messages received through social media or TV, adverse life events or traumatic experiences, and biological factors may all play a role. Cognitive distortions can exacerbate the symptoms of many mental illnesses like anxiety, depression, borderline personality disorder, and PTSD. Cognitive distortions can contribute to decreased motivation, low self-esteem, depressed mood, and unhealthy behaviors like substance use, disordered eating, avoidance, or self-harming behaviors. Here are examples of 10 of the most common types of cognitive distortions. You may recognize these in yourself or your loved ones. While anyone can be affected by cognitive distortions, they typically have a more significant impact on the lives of individuals with mental health disorders like depression and anxiety. Also known as black-and-white thinking, polarized thinking, or dichotomous thinking, all-or-nothing thinking is a type of cognitive distortion that involves viewing things in absolute terms: all good or all bad, angelic or evil, perfection or total failure. There is no in-between. Individuals who exhibit all-or-nothing thinking may express thoughts like, "If I'm not perfect, I have failed." When confronting all-or-nothing thinking, patients are encouraged to recognize that ideas like a successful person, a perfect partner, a loyal friend, or a good parent are not all-or-nothing concepts. Success, for example, is a process of trial and error, ups and downs. And a loyal friend may still make mistakes or let us down sometimes. We can reframe all-or-nothing thinking by making room for the "gray." We can give ourselves—and others—more flexibility in meeting more nuanced definitions of successful, perfect, loyal, or good. Even when we fall short, working toward improvement is a valuable and rewarding journey. In overgeneralization, individuals see patterns based on a single event and assume that all future events will have the same outcome. An example of this kind of cognitive distortion might be, "Nothing good ever happens to me." One way to combat this kind of thinking is changing our language. Instead of using phrases like "ever," "never," and "always," we can describe our experiences more specifically, recognizing that each day or situation brings unique circumstances. "I didn't do well on that test, and I think I could do better on the next one." Mental or negative filtering focuses entirely on negative examples and experiences, filtering out anything positive. Individuals who engage in negative filtering, may notice all of their failures but not see any of their successes. Exercises to combat negative filtering help individuals highlight neutral or positive events rather than solely focusing on the negative. Similar to negative filtering, discounting the positive involves invalidating or "explaining away" good things that have happened. Instead of ignoring the positives like negative filtering, individuals see the positives but actively reject the positive aspects of a situation or person. Some examples might be, "Well, that' doesn't count because I had help." To combat this pattern, individuals are encouraged to give themselves (and others) some credit and recognize their role in bringing about a positive outcome. We engage in "mind reading" when we attribute thoughts, feelings, and intentions to another person, regardless of the lack of evidence. "They think I'm a loser." In fortune telling, an individual predicts events will unfold in a particular way, often to avoid trying something difficult. "I'm going to fail the test anyway, so why study." "No one is going to hire me, so I have to stay in this job I don't like." Fortune telling can prevent individuals from taking actions to shape their own lives in positive ways. To confront these thought patterns, individuals are asked to check the facts and ask questions to challenge their initial assumptions. If we try something different, is it possible that the outcome could be different too? Are we sure that person thinks we're a loser, or could they possibly be avoiding conversation because they're shy? Magnification cognitive distortions occur when an individual blows things out of proportion. For example, someone might view a small mistake as an epic failure. Minimization occurs when we inappropriately shrink something—like an achievement— to make it seem less important. Some people may minimize their strengths and positive qualities and believe they are not "likable." When bad things happen, individuals view them as proof of their failures. And when good things happen, they minimize their importance. Emotional reasoning assumes that because we feel a certain way, what we think at that moment must be true. This kind of thinking gives emotions total control of a situation rather than the facts of the situation. Examples of emotional reasoning could be:"I feel embarrassed by what happened, so I must be an idiot.""I feel angry, so this person I'm talking to must not care about or respect me.""I feel guilty, so I must be responsible for this situation." While feelings are always valid and are "true" while we are experiencing them, feelings are not facts. Confronting emotional reasoning helps us analyze situations based on more information than just how we feel in the moment. Framing thoughts with words like "should," "must," or "ought," can make individuals feel guilty, or like they have already failed. These kinds of statements may apply an unrealistic set of rules or standards to how we measure ourselves and our lives. Society and culture, particularly social media, is full of explicit or implied "shoulds." Examples could be:"I should be so much further in life at my age. I'm behind and I'm never going to get on track.""I should be able to wear a size 4.""I should be doing more to help people." To combat the shoulds, musts, and oughts, patients are encouraged to lean into self-compassion. While goal setting can be very useful, replace the unrealistic goals with more realistic ones and accept yourself as who you are, rather than who you think you should be. Give yourself some grace and flexibility. Labeling involves defining yourself or another person entirely on one interaction or one behavior. Rather than seeing a behavior as something the individual did which does not necessarily define them. Often times we can view someone's behavior as who they are. Examples could be:"I missed an appointment. I'm completely useless.""He was late to our dinner. He is completely unreliable." Fact-checking and looking for evidence to the contrary are important ways to combat labeling. Have you remembered other appointments? Has he followed through on other commitments? With personalization and blame, individuals blame themselves, or someone else, for a situation that, in reality, involves many other factors. Good examples of personalization and blame are: "My child doesn't have any friends since we moved to a new city. I have failed as a parent.""My friend canceled our lunch at the last minute with no explanation. I must have made her mad." Personalization can lead to unnecessary self-blaming and guilt when there are many other contributing factors. Strategies for comforting personalization are to 1) check your control and 2) check your responsibility. What factors in this situation do you truly control? Are you solely responsible for someone else's feelings or reactions? Who or what else could have played a part in this? The first step in reframing cognitive distortions is to be more aware of your thoughts and emotions and how they influence one another. Tools like an automatic thought record help patients document their thoughts, see intersections with their emotions, and recognize patterns over time. Tools like the Feelings Wheel or a mood journal can help patients separate their emotions from their thoughts and name them. Considering a wider range of emotions can help you explore different triggers and coping strategies. Are you angry? Or are you annoyed? Analyzing thoughts and feelings together helps us interrupt unhealthy patterns. What thoughts contributed to that feeling of annoyance? In the situation where you felt annoyed, what aspects could you control? What judgments or labels did you place on yourself or others? What information did you not have or not consider? What could you do differently next time? Note that our bodies play a role tool. Physical sensations like hunger, temperature, or tiredness can impact thoughts and feelings. Likewise, using physical sensations like breathing exercises or changing our temperature can give us another tool to influence our thoughts and emotions. Another way to address cognitive distortions is to cultivate a growth mindset rather than one based on success or failure. Focus on small steps in a new direction and celebrate small victories. Cognitive distortions develop over time, and working to replace them takes time and practice too. Confronting most cognitive distortions requires viewing ourselves and others through a different lens. For people with depression and anxiety, useful tools toward that aim can be positive self-talk, self-affirmation statements, and engaging in activities that build self-esteem and self-worth like exercise, healthy eating, and supportive relationships. Changing entrenched negative thought patterns like cognitive distortions often requires help from a mental health professional. Outpatient assessment and therapy is a good place to start. For patients who are struggling with more severe, therapy-interfering, or life-interrupting symptoms, a day treatment or residential treatment program may offer the intensive treatment needed to make progress. Cognitive distortions are negative or irrational patterns of thinking. These negative thought patterns can play a role in diminishing your motivation, lowering your self-esteem, and contributing to problems like anxiety, depression, and substance use. This article discusses different cognitive distortions and how they work. It also discusses hypothetical examples to show how this kind of thinking affects behavior and what you can do to help overcome these distortions. All-or-nothing thinking is also known as black-and-white thinking or polarized thinking. This type of thinking involves viewing things in absolute terms: Situations are always black or white, everything or nothing, good or bad, success or failure. An example of all-or-nothing thinking is dwelling on mistakes and assuming you will never be able to do well, instead of acknowledging the error and trying to move past it. One way to overtime this cognitive distortion is to recognize that success and progress are not all-or-nothing concepts. By addressing this type of thinking and replacing self-defeating thoughts, you can feel better about your progress and recognize your strengths. Overgeneralization happens when you make a rule after a single event or a series of coincidences. The words "always" or "never" frequently appear in the sentence. Because you have experience with one event playing out a certain way, you assume that all future events will have the same outcome. For example, imagine that you made a suggestion about a work project that wasn't adopted in the final work. You might overgeneralize this and assume that no one at work ever listens to you or takes you seriously. One way to combat overgeneralization is to focus on using realistic language. Instead of saying, "I always do that!," say something such as, "That happens sometimes, but I'll try to do better next time." A mental filter is the opposite of overgeneralization, but with the same negative outcome. Instead of taking one small event and generalizing it inappropriately, the mental filter takes one small event and focuses on it exclusively, filtering out anything else. For example, Nathan focuses on all of the negative or hurtful things that his partner has said or done in their relationship, but he filters all the kind and thoughtful things his partner does. This thinking contributes to feelings of negativity about his partner and their relationship. Journaling is one strategy that might help overcome mental filtering. Make an effort to intentionally shift your focus from the negative and look for more neutral or positive aspects of a situation. Discounting the positive is a cognitive distortion that involves ignoring or invalidating good things that have happened to you. It is similar to mental filtering, but instead of simply ignoring the positives, you are actively rejecting them. For example, Joel completes a project and receives an award for his outstanding work. Rather than feeling proud of his achievement, he attributes it to pure luck that has nothing to do with his talent and effort. One way to overcome this cognitive distortion is to reframe how you attribute events. Instead of seeing positive outcomes as flukes, focus on noticing how your own strengths, skills, and efforts contributed to the outcome. By having more faith in your abilities, you'll feel more empowered and less likely to experience learned helplessness, a phenomenon where people feel that they have no control over the outcome. There are two ways of jumping to conclusions: Mind reading: When you think someone is going to react in a particular way, or you believe someone is thinking things that they aren'tFortune telling: When you predict events will unfold in a particular way, often to avoid trying something difficult For example, Jamie believes that he cannot stand life without heroin. Such beliefs hold him back from getting the treatment and help that he needs to successfully recover from substance use. To overcome this cognitive distortion, take a moment to consider the facts before you make a decisions. Ask questions and challenge your initial assumptions. Magnification is exaggerating the importance of shortcomings and problems while minimizing the importance of desirable qualities. Similar to mental filtering and discounting the positive, this cognitive distortion involves magnifying your negative qualities while minimizing your positive ones. For example, when something bad happens, you see this as "proof" of your own failures. But when good things happen, you minimize their importance. For example, a person addicted to pain medication might magnify the importance of eliminating all pain and exaggerate how unbearable their pain is. To overcome magnification, focus on learning how to identify these thoughts and intentionally replacing them with more helpful, realistic ways of thinking. Emotional reasoning is a way of judging yourself or your circumstances based on your emotions. This type of reasoning assumes that because you are experiencing a negative emotion, it must accurately reflect reality. If you feel experience feelings of guilt, for example, emotional reasoning would lead you to conclude that you are a bad person. For instance, Jenna used emotional reasoning to conclude that she was a worthless person, which in turn led to binge eating. While research has found that this distortion is common in people who have anxiety and depression, it is actually a very common way of thinking that many people engage in. Cognitive behavior therapy can help people recognize the signs of emotional reasoning and realize that feelings are not facts. "Should" statements involve always thinking about things that you think you "should" or "must" do. These types of statements can make you feel worried or anxious. They can also cause you to experience guilt or a sense of failure. Because you always think you "should" be doing something, you end up feeling as if you are constantly failing. An example: Cheryl thinks she should be able to play a song on her violin without making any mistakes. When she does make mistakes, she feels angry and upset with herself. As a result, she starts to avoid practicing her violin. When you recognize yourself engaging in this cognitive distortion, focus on practicing self-compassion. Replace these statements with more realistic ones, and work on accepting yourself for who you are rather than who you think you should be. Labeling is a cognitive distortion that involves making a judgment about yourself or someone else as a person, rather than seeing the behavior as something the person did that doesn't define them as an individual. For example, you might label yourself as a failure. You can also label other people as well. You might decide that someone is a jerk because of one interaction and continue to judge them in all future interactions through that lens with no room for redemption. You can combat labeling by challenging the accuracy of your assumptions. Look for evidence that counters your negative thoughts. Remind yourself of the difference between opinions and facts. Hosted by therapist Amy Morin, LCSW, this episode of The Verywell Mind Podcast, shares how you can learn to be less judgmental. Click below to listen now. Follow Now: Apple Podcasts / Spotify / Google Podcasts Personalization and blame is a cognitive distortion whereby you entirely blame yourself, or someone else, for a situation that, in reality, involved many factors that were out of your control. For example, Anna blamed herself for her daughter's bad grade in school. Instead of trying to find out why her daughter is struggling and exploring ways to help, Anna assumes it is a sign that she is a bad mother. When you find yourself engaging in this cognitive distortion, make a conscious effort to consider other factors that might have played a role in the situation. Instead of blaming yourself for something that happened, consider external factors or other people's actions that might have also been contributing factors. Once you recognize that you are experiencing cognitive distortions, there are steps you can take to change these ways of thinking. Getting help is important, because these distorted thought patterns can seriously affect mental health and well-being. To change cognitive distortions: Try to notice the thoughts that contribute to feelings of anxiety, negativity, or depression. Practices such as journaling and mindfulness may help you build better awareness of your own thoughts. Cognitive distortions can contribute to poor decisions making, but they can also play a significant role in the onset and maintenance of mental illness and other issues. Such distortions are associated with the following: As you recognize that distorted thoughts cause problems, it is essential to work to change them actively. It may be uncomfortable, particularly at first, but work on challenging yourself. Is there evidence that contradicts your thoughts? Are there more helpful ways of thinking about a situation? If cognitive distortions are contributing to feelings of anxiety, depression, or other mental health problems, consider talking to a therapist. A therapist can utilize cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and other strategies to help you change these distorted ways of thinking. CBT is an approach that helps people recognize these cognitive distortions and replace them with more helpful, realistic thoughts. Techniques that your therapist may utilize include cognitive reframing and cognitive restructuring. We've tried, tested, and written unbiased reviews of the best online therapy programs including Talkspace, BetterHelp, and ReGain. Find out which option is the best for you. Cognitive distortions are the mind's way of playing tricks on us and convincing us of something that just isn't true. While many cognitive distortions are common, there are some that can indicate a more serious condition and take a toll on mental health, leading to an increase in symptoms of stress, anxiety, or depression. If you think that cognitive distortions may be altering your sense of reality and are concerned about how these thoughts may be negatively affecting your life, talk to your healthcare provider or therapist. Treatments such as cognitive behavioral therapy are helpful and can help you learn to think in ways that are more accurate and helpful. Depending on how we interpret events, our minds can sometimes play tricks on us. They can convince us of things that aren't true, even though they feel rational to us. When these inaccurate beliefs influence our thoughts, emotions, and actions, we can feel anxious, stressed, angry, or depressed about ourselves (or the world around us). These faulty beliefs are known as cognitive distortions. What Are Cognitive Distortions? Anyone can experience cognitive distortion, which the American Psychological Association defines as "faulty or inaccurate thinking, perception or belief." Negativity is often the defining characteristic. For some of us, distorted thinking is a momentary blip. We get upset when we fail a math test. We briefly reason that we're bad at math, instead of realizing we need to study more. But we typically move on and try again. For others, cognitive distortions are a pattern of thinking that interferes with their lives and relationships. In these cases, distorted thinking can lead to chronic anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems such as misuse of substances. The 10 Most Common Cognitive Distortions Let's review some common cognitive distortion examples. You might see your own thought patterns reflected here, or they may describe someone you know. You to expect the worst outcome in any situation. You often find yourself thinking, "What if…?" If your child misses curfew, you imagine he's been in a car accident. If your boss schedules a meeting, you worry you'll be fired. And your thinking spirals from there: You may think of losing your child. Getting fired means you'll become homeless. Catastrophic thinking can lead to is closely related to and can be heavily influenced by depression and anxiety disorders. This type of thinking can lead to relationship straining behaviors or judgements. People engaging in catastrophic thinking might see everything as pointless. When something goes right — say you get a promotion — you acknowledge it but refuse to take credit. Instead, you chalk it up to dumb luck or a mistake. Or, you receive many positive comments on an evaluation, but choose to focus on a single piece of negative feedback. This kind of thinking can hurt a person's sense of pride and self-esteem. Anxiety is associated with discounting positives. You rely on "gut" feelings over objective evidence to judge yourself and the world. For example, "I feel like a bad mother, therefore I must be a bad mother." This kind of thinking can be harmful as it may lead to irrational decision making and judgements. Eating disorders and other behavior changes may come from emotional reasoning. You often define yourself and others with negative labels. In assigning labels, you focus on one past behavior or event. Your co-worker is "lazy" because they came to work late. You're "stupid" because you failed the math test. Labeling and mislabeling can damage a person's self-esteem and their view of other people. This thinking can have effects similar to depression. You view yourself, your life, and your future through a negative lens. You ignore anything positive. Filtering can increase feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Mental filtering can be linked to depression or suicidal thoughts. People exhibiting mental filtering might isolate themselves from others. You base your decisions not on what someone says or does, but on what you believe they're thinking. You don't ask what the other person thinks or feels. Mind-reading is a kind of jumping to conclusions where you fill in the gaps of your knowledge by assuming someone else's thoughts. You believe you can read minds or anticipate reactions. This assumption may stem from one instance of being correct that makes you believing you always know what others are really thinking. Fortune-telling is another form of cognitive distortion related to jumping to conclusions. You insist you can predict the future, regardless of what you do. You'll be famous without putting in the hard work. Or you'll always be a failure, so hard work is a waste of time. People who overgeneralize apply their experience from one event to another. If your marriage ended in divorce, you think you're not worthy of love. As a result, you might conclude you should never date again. Overgeneralizing can lead to damaged self-esteem and world view. If people often tell you, "stop taking this so personally," then you likely experience personalization. You blame yourself for things outside of your control. You falsely believe that everything that someone says or does is a direct reaction to you. Personalization can convince you that you are being targeted or excluded. It can also cause you to compare yourself to others. This kind of thinking deals in extremes. People and situations are either great or terrible. You believe you're either destined for success or failure. You don't allow room for balanced perspectives or outcomes. You have a list of rules for how people should and shouldn't behave. Constantly blaming yourself or others for what "should" have been said or done (but wasn't) can increase stress and anxiety. You will never be happy if you always focus on what "should" have been. Challenging Cognitive Distortions Cognitive behavioral therapy is widely used to help break the cycle of distorted thinking. A trained psychotherapist can work with you to retrain your brain to identify and challenge cognitive distortions using thought records, cognitive restructuring exercises, and behavioral exercises. Identify the thought: Take a moment to examine and analyze your thought process that has led you to this conclusion. Do you have proof to support this thought? Are you drawing conclusions based on your feelings or on evidence? How might your own biases influence this conclusion? Reframe the thought: Try approaching your situation from a different perspective. Perhaps imagine the best possible outcome versus the worst possible outcome, versus what is most likely to happen. Consider why you think this way: Think about the conclusion you've made and if any of your preconceptions may have influenced this. Cognitive Behavior Therapy can help prevent cognitive distortions: Cognitive distortions are common and can be difficult to manage, however there are treatments such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to help. CBT is typically a short-term therapy solution that works to identify the troubling or traumatic situations in your life, increase your awareness of the thoughts and beliefs you hold regarding those situations as well as the negative or inaccurate thoughts surrounding them, and reshaping those thoughts to be more conducive to healthy thinking. This final step is the most difficult and can take time and practice to make your thoughts healthy and helpful. For more information on behavioral health services, call UPMC Western Psychiatric Hospital at 1-877-624-4100 or 412-624-1000. Editor's Note: This article was originally published on May 13, 2021, and was last reviewed on April 20, 2022.Andrea Wyssen. Relevance of the Thought–Shape Fusion Trait Questionnaire for healthy women and women presenting symptoms of eating disorders and mixed mental disorders. Clinical Psychology Psychotherapy. LinkDavid Berle. Does Emotional Reasoning Change During Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Anxiety? Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. Link Laura L. Fazakas-DeHoog. A Cognitive Distortions and Deficits Model of Suicide Ideation. Europe's Journal of Psychology. Link Melina Andrea del Pozo. Cognitive Distortions in Anorexia Nervosa and Borderline Personality Disorder. Psychiatry Research. LinkMohamad El Haj. False Memory in Alzheimer's Disease. Behavioral Neurology. LinkOlimpia Matarazzo. The Gambler's Fallacy in Problem and Non-Problem Gamblers. Journal of Behavioral Addictions. Link Depending on how we interpret events, our minds can sometimes play tricks on us. They can convince us of things that aren't true, even though they feel rational to us. When these inaccurate beliefs influence our thoughts, emotions, and actions, we can feel anxious, stressed, angry, or depressed about ourselves (or the world around us). These faulty beliefs are known as cognitive distortions. What Are Cognitive Distortions? Anyone can experience cognitive distortion, which the American Psychological Association defines as "faulty or inaccurate thinking, perception or belief." Negativity is often the defining characteristic. For some of us, distorted thinking is a momentary blip. We get upset when we fail a math test. We briefly reason that we're bad at math, instead of realizing we need to study more. But we typically move on and try again. For others, cognitive distortions are a pattern of thinking that interferes with their lives and relationships. In these cases, distorted thinking can lead to chronic anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems such as misuse of substances. The 10 Most Common Cognitive Distortions Let's review some common cognitive distortion examples. You might see your own thought patterns reflected here, or they may describe someone you know. You to expect the worst outcome in any situation. You often find yourself thinking, "What if…?" If your child misses curfew, you imagine he's been in a car accident. If your boss schedules a meeting, you worry you'll be fired. And your thinking spirals from there: You may think of losing your child. Getting fired means you'll become homeless. Catastrophic thinking can lead to is closely related to and can be heavily influenced by depression and anxiety disorders. This type of thinking can lead to relationship straining behaviors or judgements. People engaging in catastrophic thinking might see everything as pointless. When something goes right — say you get a promotion — you acknowledge it but refuse to take credit. Instead, you chalk it up to dumb luck or a mistake. Or, you receive many positive comments on an evaluation, but choose to focus on a single piece of negative feedback. This kind of thinking can hurt a person's sense of pride and self-esteem. Anxiety is associated with discounting positives. You rely on "gut" feelings over objective evidence to judge yourself and the world. For example, "I feel like a bad mother, therefore I must be a bad mother." This kind of thinking can be harmful as it may lead to irrational decision making and judgements. Eating disorders and other behavior changes may come from emotional reasoning. You often define yourself and others with negative labels. In assigning labels, you focus on one past behavior or event. Your co-worker is "lazy" because they came to work late. You're "stupid" because you failed the math test. Labeling and mislabeling can damage a person's self-esteem and their view of other people. This thinking can have effects similar to depression. You view yourself, your life, and your future through a negative lens. You ignore anything positive. Filtering can increase feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Mental filtering can be linked to depression or suicidal thoughts. People exhibiting mental filtering might isolate themselves from others. You base your decisions not on what someone says or does, but on what you believe they're thinking. You don't ask what the other person thinks or feels. Mind-reading is a kind of jumping to conclusions where you fill in the gaps of your knowledge by assuming someone else's thoughts. You believe you can read minds or anticipate reactions. This assumption may stem from one instance of being correct that makes you believing you always know what others are really thinking. Fortune-telling is another form of cognitive distortion related to jumping to conclusions. You insist you can predict the future, regardless of what you do. You'll be famous without putting in the hard work. Or you'll always be a failure, so hard work is a waste of time. People who overgeneralize apply their experience from one event to another. If your marriage ended in divorce, you think you're not worthy of love. As a result, you might conclude you should never date again. Overgeneralizing can lead to damaged self-esteem and world view. If people often tell you, "stop taking this so personally," then you likely experience personalization. You blame yourself for things outside of your control. You falsely believe that everything that someone says or does is a direct reaction to you. Personalization can convince you that you are being targeted or excluded. It can also cause you to compare yourself to others. This kind of thinking deals in extremes. People and situations are either great or terrible. You believe you're either destined for success or failure. You don't allow room for balanced perspectives or outcomes. You have a list of rules for how people should and shouldn't behave. Constantly blaming yourself or others for what "should" have been said or done (but wasn't) can increase stress and anxiety. You will never be happy if you always focus on what "should" have been. Challenging Cognitive Distortions Cognitive behavioral therapy is widely used to help break the cycle of distorted thinking. A trained psychotherapist can work with you to retrain your brain to identify and challenge cognitive distortions using thought records, cognitive restructuring exercises, and behavioral exercises. Identify the thought: Take a moment to examine and analyze your thought process that has led you to this conclusion. Do you have proof to support this thought? Are you drawing conclusions based on your feelings or on evidence? How might your own biases influence this conclusion? Reframe the thought: Try approaching your situation from a different perspective. Perhaps imagine the best possible outcome versus the worst possible outcome, versus what is most likely to happen. Consider why you think this way: Think about the conclusion you've made and if any of your preconceptions may have influenced this. Cognitive Behavior Therapy can help prevent cognitive distortions: Cognitive distortions are common and can be difficult to manage, however there are treatments such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to help. CBT is typically a short-term therapy solution that works to identify the troubling or traumatic situations in your life, increase your awareness of the thoughts and beliefs you hold regarding those situations as well as the negative or inaccurate thoughts surrounding them, and reshaping those thoughts to be more conducive to healthy thinking. This final step is the most difficult and can take time and practice to make your thoughts healthy and helpful. For more information on behavioral health services, call UPMC Western Psychiatric Hospital at 1-877-624-4100 or 412-624-1000. Editor's Note: This article was originally published on May 13, 2021, and was last reviewed on April 20, 2022.Andrea Wyssen. Relevance of the Thought–Shape Fusion Trait Questionnaire for healthy women and women presenting symptoms of eating disorders and mixed mental disorders. Clinical Psychology Psychotherapy. LinkDavid Berle. Does Emotional Reasoning Change During Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Anxiety? Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. Link Laura L. Fazakas-DeHoog. A Cognitive Distortions and Deficits Model of Suicide Ideation. Europe's Journal of Psychology. Link Melina Andrea del Pozo. Cognitive Distortions in Anorexia Nervosa and Borderline Personality Disorder. Psychiatry Research. LinkMohamad El Haj. False Memory in Alzheimer's Disease. Behavioral Neurology. LinkOlimpia Matarazzo. The Gambler's Fallacy in Problem and Non-Problem Gamblers. Journal of Behavioral Addictions. Link Aayushi Bagga•August 22, 2022• 10 min read"I have the worst luck in the world," "All the wrongs happen only in my life," and "My life is doomed" are some of the phrases you may have made or heard at some point in your life. What exactly are these phrases/statements? These are all cognitive distortions.Cognitive distortions as a term may be new to you. Simply put, Cognitive Distortions are thought patterns that cause people to perceive the world and themselves in an irrational- usually negative manner. Cognitive distortions are negative habits or thinking patterns that cause us to exaggerate and perceive reality in an inaccurate manner that can lead to unhealthy mindsets permanently. There are many types of cognitive distortions, but they all have three factors in common:They are false or inaccurate.They are tendencies or patterns of thinking or believing.They have the potential to cause psychological damage.These thought patterns occur in our minds automatically in our everyday thoughts. Their habitual and easy occurrence makes it difficult to distinguish and identify them as wrongful because they are so strongly wired into our brains. While research suggests that most people may not suffer from cognitive distortions in their daily lives, it seems that no one can completely escape going through these distortions. It's likely that if you are human, you would have experienced or fallen for a few cognitive distortions at one time or another. Some people suffer from it occasionally, while others suffer from it on a long-term basis.It is important to recognize and keep these cognitive distortions in check as they are highly effective at magnifying symptoms of depression and anxiety and can provoke mood disorder symptoms. Cultural, environmental and social factors are responsible for causing cognitive distortions. Many cognitive distortions exist. Let's take a look at the most common examples of cognitive distortions below :Called all-or-nothing thinking, or black and white thinking, people with this mindset will tend to always think in extremes. For example, a person will think they are either very successful or a complete failure. Another example would be when a person perceives people in their life as either angelic or devil-like. There is no in-between for such an unhealthy mindset as mostly reality is always in between.In this distortion, a person forms a conclusion about one event, and then they apply that conclusion to other realms. Since they conclude a single event, they still tend to conclude that all similar experiences in the future will result in the same failure or negative experience. For example, one bad score on a test will lead the person to believe that they can never score well on any test. This distortion has been associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and other anxiety disorders.In this distortion, the thought pattern focuses solely on the negatives while conveniently ignoring the positives. The negative mental filtering will then lead the person to magnify the negatives of the situation and then dwell on those feelings. People with this distortion tend to focus on what's not working instead of what is working. For example, an employee focuses on one negative comment in his performance review and ignores the good review. Researchers have seen that focusing on only negative aspects can lead to hopelessness and suicidal thoughts.In this thinking pattern, a person has a constant need to feel right and will go to any extent to prove their point as a factor the only valid point of view. People with this distortion cannot accept being wrong. Therefore, they always end up internalizing their opinions as to the truth and will make sure to prove other people's opinions as wrong or invalid.In facing this distortion, there is a false belief that the emotion a person is experiencing is the truth- how he/she feels about a situation ends up being the reality of that situation in their mind. A person's emotion is accepted as fact, and all logical reasoning is completely disregarded. For example, you may feel lonely at this moment because your friends are out having fun. However, from this feeling, you believe that no one loves you and now wants to include you in their plans.Catastrophizing occurs when the intensity of an event is either magnified or diminished. In magnification, a person will blow things out of proportion. For example, if a person does poorly in one set of exams, they believe that they have failed the entire academic year. In the case of diminishing an event, minimizing occurs where a person will minimize the magnitude of positive events. For example, a swimmer who wins a medal for his performance may diminish the accomplishment by believing so many others have already won such a medal before.In this distortion, a person will take anything and everything as a personal attack. This will cause a direct and personal relation to everything others to say, even if it is completely unrelated. A person feels they are to be blamed for any adverse scenario or circumstance. For example, a person may feel that everyone is in a bad mood because of him, even though that isn't the case.In this distortion, there are two ways this can work in a person's mind. The first is mind-reading when people assume they know what others are thinking. A person assumes what other people's feelings or intentions are and assumes them to be the solemn truth without any actual evidence. For example, a person who spends time with her partner may notice that the partner is distracted and will automatically assume that the partner is distracted because she is boring or unattractive. The second type is fortune-telling, which is a lot like mind reading, but in this, a person makes conclusions and predictions without any evidence whatsoever. For example, a person thinks that they will fail an exam even though they are well prepared and studied sincerely for it.This distortion involves thoughts that include "should," "shouldn't," "ought," or "must." These should statement always leave feelings of guilt, anger, resentment, frustration, or shame. In addition, these statements are either forced on others or themselves. For example, "I must lose weight to look more attractive" or "he should have called me earlier" are examples of surmounting pressure a person creates, causing unnecessary disappointments for themselves.All the blame is put on someone or something else in this distortion. A person going through this distortion will never take accountability and will find an external source to blame for their problem or misery. For example, placing blame for relationship issues on a partner instead of sharing the responsibility for actions by both the partners.In this distortion, a person reduces themselves or someone else to a single negative characteristic or descriptor like "cheater" or "drunk." When people label, they define themselves or somebody else based on a single event or behaviour. Labelling causes people to berate themselves and others. For example, if you ask a colleague for help and they cannot help you, you immediately label them as "selfish," disregarding the fact that the colleague may not have helped you then because they were swamped with work. Labelling is one of the big causes of relationships ending.In this distortion, a person sees things as externally controlled (we have no control and we are helpless victims of fate) or internally controlled (we are in complete control of ourselves and our surroundings). Both beliefs are inaccurate and equally damaging. No one has complete control over everything, yet no one has no control over their situation.This distortion assumes that for me to be happy, others must change their behaviour, which will make me happy. A person believes that when the other people change their behaviour and behave according to him/her, then it will bring them happiness. For example, a person may think other people should change their schedule to accommodate yours and suit your timings.In this distortion, the thought pattern assumes that all things in life should be measured based on fairness and equality. Unfortunately, this is far from reality and will more often than not result in resentment. For example, a person who earns less may feel angry towards people who earn more than them. They may feel that even though they work just as hard yet, they make lesser money. They don't take into consideration factors like job profile, educational background, industry type, etc.In this thinking pattern, a person feels that they should be rewarded fairly in return for all the good work they do. In this distortion, people expect divine rewards for their sacrifices and feel that they will be awarded for all their good karma. Unfortunately, this doesn't end up working that way, and it can end up leaving a person bitter and angry. For example, you expected you would get a certain salary appraisal for all your hard work, but you didn't get it. You may resent your boss or company even though you may have disregarded the other factors that play a role in salary appraisal.One or more of these cognitive distortions will look familiar to most of us. Therefore, it is important to identify which cognitive distortions you experience for you to be able to overcome that pattern of negative thinking. Thought patterns can be changed through a process called COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING. This process involves adjusting and checking our automatic thoughts and feelings; we can influence our emotions and behaviours. There are three DIY techniques you can consider when you go through a cognitive distortion; Identifying what thought is troubling you and what wrong thinking pattern could you be applying, then is reframing your negative feeling or interpretation of that thought into something objective and positive, lastly doing a cost-benefit analysis of your thinking pattern wherein you analyse whether a particular thinking pattern has cost you more or benefitted you more. The fourth way to tackle this is to consider Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, a goal-based talk therapy that helps people understand their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and actions.PodcastsPersonlised 1:1 SessionsArticlesSupportive CommunitiesAayushi is a counselling psychologist and a seasoned content writer on all things mental health. She holds a master's degree in Counselling Psychology, and her interest lies in family and relationship counselling. Her passion for spreading mental health awareness is immeasurable.Author's Bio