

Cognitive Distortions – When Your Thoughts Are Hurting You

One of the best tools we have for living a healthy life is our ability to think. Our world is composed of a large number of events that happen constantly. Some are positive and some are negative, and most are neutral. We interpret these events as they happen with a series of thoughts that flow continually through our minds. This process is called our *internal dialogue*. We constantly think about present and past events, and sometimes about things that will happen in the future. And here's the important point – these thoughts need to be accurate. We need good reality testing in order to live effectively.

Our moods or feelings are created by the thoughts we have, and not by the actual events themselves. We need to think about events and attach a *meaning* to them before we experience an emotional response. People have different ways of interpreting the same event. Let's say that our friend, Rhonda, has decided to move to a different part of the country. Some people will congratulate her for making a move that could bring her the happiness she has sought for a long time. Other people might condemn her for running away from the life she has here. Some will call her healthy. Some will call her greedy. Some will call her heartless. How we think about Rhonda will reflect our core beliefs about the world.

We define Rhonda's actions in terms of how we personally interpret the world – and these interpretations reflect the basic assumptions we have about how the world works. Her move in itself signifies nothing until we think about it and place an interpretation or meaning on it. If we see it as a healthy move on her part, we can have a happy response. If we see her as being selfish, we might have an angry or depressed response to her move. Once we give meaning to an event, we can experience an emotional response to it. In other words, our thoughts can influence how we feel.

If the meaning we give to events is usually negative, we might constantly find ourselves feeling *depressed*. If the meaning is usually positive, we may find ourselves *feeling good* much of the time. If we give threatening meanings to events in the world, we might find ourselves living with a lot of *anger*. If we see the world as a stressful place, we might experience *anxiety* as a result. Sometimes we give meaning to our own actions that are negative (that is, we judge ourselves in a negative light). This might arise from a negative self-image and our mood will reflect this core belief in a variety of negative ways.

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Our emotional health depends on our ability to make good, reality-oriented judgments about what is going on in the world around us. Sometimes events are positive. We need to interpret them in precisely this way and have an appropriate emotional response to the situation (that is, happiness). At other times, events are negative and we ought to be able to give proper meaning to these events so that we can take correct action to deal with the problem in a reality-based way.

Most of us distort our thoughts to some degree. We all have unique lives, with different experiences, different parents, different friends, different problems to work through – so that throughout the course of our lives we have learned our own ways of interpreting the world. Our interpretations are not always based in reality and are often colored by our unique needs. We develop our own core beliefs about how the world operates, and, when various situations present themselves, these beliefs lead us to *automatic thoughts* (these are well-learned ways of thinking about situations that are instantaneous and reflect our underlying beliefs about the world). Sometimes these automatic thoughts are distorted. It is important to examine our cognitive distortions so that we make the right decisions in life and increase our chance of experiencing a good mood. Working with a trained therapist in examining these distortions is an

especially effective way of dealing with depression.

David D. Burns, in his classic book, *Feeling Good*, has identified several common cognitive distortions.

All-or-Nothing Thinking

This is when we see things in black and white categories. Events are either right or wrong, with no shades of gray in between. This cognitive distortion is the basis of perfectionism – either you do a perfect job on something or you’ve failed. Unfortunately, this sets us up for feeling like a failure and increases our chances of feeling depressed. In the natural world few things that are perfect. If you try to impose all-or-nothing categories on the world, you are not conforming to reality and you’ll always feel as if you are coming up short.

Example: “Because I didn’t marry my high school sweetheart, I’ve now lost for all time and I’ll never find happiness in love.”

Overgeneralization

This is when you see a single negative event as part of a never-ending streak of failure. Although the normal setbacks we all have in life can be disturbing when they happen, they are usually explained through different circumstances. To fail to examine these different situations, and generalize them all as having a single cause, is again a way of setting ourselves up for failure. The more effective option is to look closely at the particular reasons for an upsetting event and then to take action to correct the situation.

Example: “Here we go again. I’ve now lost three jobs in ten years. I’m just not meant to have a job.”

Mental Filter

Mental filtering or “selective abstraction” occurs when a person picks out one negative detail in a situation and dwells on it exclusively. You ignore all of the positive events that have happened and this one negative definition comes to color your interpretation of an entire situation. When people are depressed, they see the world through a negative filter – that is, they filter out the good things that have happened and see only the negative.

Example: “My best friend didn’t return my phone call today – the world is filled with insensitivity and I can no longer call her my best friend.”

Disqualifying the Positive

This is an extreme example of turning positive events into negative ones. When positive things happen, the person says that they “don’t count,” and finds a way to turn them into something negative. This cognitive distortion can be a way to express a negative self-image. This is a way of blocking out the richness that your life experience can bring.

Example: “I know my therapist complimented me on being a caring person, but that doesn’t count. She’s just doing her job, and she doesn’t really know that I’m a horrible person on the inside.”

Jumping to Conclusions

You make a negative interpretation of an event, even though there is no real evidence to support this conclusion. There are two variations of jumping to conclusions –

Fortune Telling – This is where you anticipate that things will turn out badly and act as if they have already turned out that way. Your actions then become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Example: “I know my speech tomorrow is going to be a disaster. I’m not even getting out of bed in the morning.”

Mind Reading – Without checking it out by talking to the person or seeking other evidence, you arbitrarily conclude that someone is acting negatively toward you.

Example: “Tom didn’t act as if he even saw me on the street today, so I’m going to assume that our friendship is over.” (In truth, Tom didn’t see you on the street today. Sometimes it happens.)

Magnification and Minimization

Magnification or “catastrophizing” happens when you blow a negative event out of proportion. Minimization is the opposite process, where you look at your strengths and then trivialize them. Both of these processes take us out of touch with the reality of a situation and interfere with good decision making.

Example: “The doctor’s office didn’t call me with my lab results. I just know the doctor needs to talk to me about something very serious and she’s waiting to see me in person.”

Example: “I know I got a standing ovation tonight for spending two weeks organizing the banquet, but, really, it was nothing. Anyone could have done it.”

Emotional Reasoning

This happens when you let your emotions guide you as if they reflect the reality of a situation. When people feel depressed, they use their feelings (which are often negative) as their guide rather than doing a good reality check. It is more helpful to check the reality of your perceptions even if your intense emotions make things seem real.

Example: “I feel overwhelmed, so my problems are impossible to solve.”

Should Statements

This also includes “must” and “ought” statements. We motivate ourselves by talking about things that we “should” do – but the consequence is that we end up feeling pressured, guilty, and resentful.

Paradoxically, we then feel unmotivated and apathetic when we don’t live up to our unrealistic expectations. When we apply these statements to other people, we conclude that other people aren’t living up to our expectations of them, and this leads to our losing respect for them.

Example: “You should go and apologize to your friend.” (Even if the timing is wrong.)

Labeling

Our lives are complex and constantly changing. The definitions we place on ourselves in one situation might not be appropriate for a different situation. When we label ourselves or other people, we apply a simplistic and unfair definition that is probably wrong, or more likely, incomplete. We fail to appreciate the full complexity of life when we apply simplistic labels.

Example: “I can’t really become Mary’s friend. She’s clumsy and crude.”

Personalization

You see yourself as the cause of negative events that you are not responsible for. When something bad happens, you assume that it is your fault. This cognitive distortion leads to a feeling of personal guilt.

Example: “She went into the hospital because I didn’t call her that day.”

Book Recommendations

David D. Burns. *Feeling Good – The New Mood Therapy*, 1999, paperback, 706 pages, \$7.99. ISBN: 978-0-380-81033-8.

David D. Burns. *The Feeling Good Handbook*, 1999, paperback, 732 pages, \$22.00. ISBN: 0-452-28132-6.

A Cognitive Distortion Quiz

All of us, from time to time, make cognitive distortions. We use faulty thinking when we interpret the events that happen in our lives. If we are able to catch ourselves, however, our chances of experiencing depression, anger, guilt, and anxiety decrease, and we are more likely to make good decisions about our lives. With that in mind, take the short quiz below. It's good practice for recognizing distorted thoughts –

Identify how each of the statements below reflect distortions of realistic thinking. (Shades of gray – some of these examples reflect more than one cognitive distortion, so there are no absolutely right answers.)

1. I feel angry at you. Therefore, you must have done something bad to me.
2. I can't work for this supervisor. She's a micro-manager and a control freak.
3. I didn't get the promotion that I deserved and that just goes to prove that I'm a total loser.
4. She didn't have eye contact with me when we met, so I know she's racist.
5. I got a note from my son's teacher today about his reading. I must be a terrible mother.
6. All of my friends must be open-minded and intellectually curious, or else I'm not going to bother with them.
7. I know she thanked me for driving her to the airport, but she just did that because she felt she had to.
8. She's moving to the West Coast because I didn't spend enough time with her.
9. OH NO! I made a mistake. My life is absolutely ruined. I'll never be able to face the world again.
10. I know she complimented me on my new outfit, but she was just being nice.
11. She broke up with me last night. Now I'll never meet anybody else.