IDENTIFYING COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

1 of 2

PURPOSE

This activity can help you recognize and identify ways to overcome thinking patterns that distort the way you see yourself or perceive situations.

INSTRUCTIONS

Use the chart below to help you identify the cognitive distortions and alternative thoughts in the examples on the next page.

Common cognitive distortions	Alternative ways of thinking
All-or-nothing thinking Believing everything is either good or bad, with nothing in between.	Look for the middle ground: • Are there more than two options here? • How else can I think about the situation?
Filtering Focusing on the negatives and ignoring the positives.	Consider the whole picture: • Am I looking at the negatives and ignoring the positives?
Personalizing Unfairly blaming yourself for anything that goes wrong.	Look at all possibilities: • Is this really about me? • What other explanation might there be for this situation?
Mind reading Assuming you know what others are thinking.	Question your assumptions: • How do I know what others are thinking? What is the evidence?
Catastrophizing Imagining that potential negative consequences will be disastrous.	Seek a more realistic perspective: • What is the evidence that this will occur? • Will this matter in one month's time?
Overgeneralizing Reaching a conclusion about one event and then applying it to everything (for example, one poor math test score causes you to say you're no good at math).	Be specific: • Is it true that this is always the case? • What are the facts? What are my interpretations?
Emotional reasoning Believing something is true because you feel it is true.	Look for evidence of this belief: • Am I confusing my feelings with the facts? Are my perceptions correct?
Labelling Reducing yourself or others to a single characteristic (for example, "I am a failure," or "They're just a drunk").	Shift judgement to curiosity: • What other qualities do I have? • What might be causing their actions?
"Should" statements Thinking in terms of what "should" be said or done. This is often based on "rules" learned in the family.	Rewrite your "rules": • Change "should" to "could."

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EXAMPLES

1. A person does not get a job they applied for and thinks, "I am failing at life. I can't do anything right."

   - Cognitive distortion: _____

   - Alternative thought: _____

2. While a student is eating in the cafeteria, they look around and think, "Everyone thinks I am such a loser for eating alone."

   - Cognitive distortion: _____

   - Alternative thought: _____

3. A parent of young children compares themselves to others, focusing on the times when they lose their cool and disregard their usual gentle approach.

   - Cognitive distortion: _____

   - Alternative thought: _____

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What cognitive distortions do you tend to use?

2. What are the warning signs you notice when you may have a cognitive distortion?

3. What alternative thoughts would be helpful to you?

4. What would help you shift toward believing alternative thoughts?