COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

"THE PRIMARY CAUSE OF UNHAPPINESS IS NEVER THE SITUATION, BUT YOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT IT. BE AWARE OF THE THOUGHTS YOU ARE THINKING"

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WHAT ARE COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS?

Cognitive distortions are unhelpful thinking patters that we slip into; ways that the mind tries to convince us of something that is not true and that usually make us feel badly about ourselves or others.

For instance, a person might tell themselves, "If I do not get this promotion now, I never will." This is an example of "all or nothing" thinking. The person is only seeing things in extremes — that if she fails at something the first time, she will fail at all future attempts.

WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE?

Learning to recognise your own cognitive distortions can help you to decrease their impact.

The table below shows a list of 8 common cognitive distortions; unhelpful thinking patterns that we can slip into.

	Cognitive distortion	Description	Examples
1	All or nothing thinking	Seeing things in black-and-white categories.	"If I do not get this promotion now, I never will."
2	Overgeneralising	Believing that something will always happen because it happened once.	"I will never get it right" "This always happens to me."
3	Jumping to conclusions	Responding to a situation without having all the information.	Not hearing back on a text or job interview for example and assuming "They obviously don't like me"
4	Mind reading	Believing that you know how someone else is feeling or what they are thinking without any evidence.	"She didn't ever comment on that piece of work so she clearly doesn't think it's good enough."
5	Catastrophising	Distorting the importance of positive events.	"If I don't do well on this presentation, I'll lose my job, then no one will employ me and I will not be able to pay the bills".
6	Fortune telling	Predicting a negative outcome without actually knowing the odds of the outcome	"If I do this presentation badly, people will laugh at me."
7	Labelling	Assigning a fixed label rather than describing the behaviour	"He is a bad person" (rather than "He lied") or "I am stupid" (rather than "I made a mistake").
8	Discounting the positive	Believing that if a good thing happens, it must not be important or does not count	"I got the job, but I was just lucky" "I was in the right place at the right time to solve that problem"

Now you have a better understanding of what cognitive distortions are, it is time to become aware of your own cognitive distortions.

First, start by connecting to your present experience. What do you feel? Try to identify which emotion (e.g. anxiety, irritability, sadness, or shame) is present. Write the emotion in the first column labelled "Feelings." You can also write down any notable physical sensations, (e.g. muscular tension or headache), as uncomfortable somatic states can sometimes be caused by problematic thinking as well.

Once you have identified what you are feeling, notice what thoughts are running through your mind as you experience those emotions or physical sensations. This step helps you to gain more insight in the relationship between thoughts and feelings.

Finally, analyse your thoughts for any cognitive distortions. If you notice that your thinking reflects one or more cognitive distortions, write it/them down. If not, your perspective is likely to be rational and you are probably experiencing a normal emotional response to something difficult.

Feelings	Thoughts	Cognitive distortion?
(Write down what feelings you are experiencing; these can include emotions and physical sensations.)	(Notice what thoughts are associated with your feelings and write those down here.)	(Analyse your thoughts; is there a cognitive distortion there or is your thought(s) rational?)

THREE QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU GAIN CONTROL OF YOUR THOUGHTS

- What do I know for sure?

- What would a computer algorithm do with this? Is what I'm thinking even logical?

- What would I say to a friend if they were to say this to me?

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