

HOW COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS CAUSE EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

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Psychologists believe that our feelings are largely dependent on our thoughts. *Cognitive distortions*, also known as errors in thinking, can lead to unnecessary anxiety, resentment, and depression. An important cue or signal that one or more of these errors in thinking is operating is your degree of emotional distress or interpersonal conflict. You may begin to feel better and function more effectively with others if you can learn to observe your thinking for such errors, and then develop (through intentional behavioral change) thoughts that are more logical, verifiable, and adaptive. In other words, if you want to change how you *feel*, then change how you *think*. At the same time, it is important to remember that no human being exhibits 100% logical thinking all the time. Although many of these concepts are so popular that they are part of the public domain, the following terms are adapted from various original sources including the writings of psychotherapists such as Albert Ellis, Ph.D., Donald Meichenbaum, Ph.D., Martin Seligman, Ph.D., Maxie Maultsby, M.D., Aaron T. Beck, M.D., James P. McCullough, Ph.D., and others.

Absolutistic thinking occurs when a thought is equated with reality. The underlying belief is, “If I think so, then it’s so.” This type of thinking leads to rigidity, inflexibility, bigotry, and lack of emotional and behavioral freedom.

All-or-nothing thinking is a form of absolutistic thinking that occurs when a person thinks in terms of “always,” “every,” “never,” and “there is no other choice.” Few aspects of life are ever so absolute.

Arbitrary inference involves drawing a conclusion when evidence is lacking or contrary to the conclusion. This type of thinking may also include distorting reality or failing to test a thought against reality.

Binary thinking is another term for dichotomous reasoning, which can involve “all or none” thinking. A binary thinker may use categories such as good-bad, right-wrong, success-failure, or perfect-incompetent.

Catastrophizing, also known as *awfulizing*, occurs when a situation is thought or said to be “awful” or “terrible.” “Horrible” is another favorite word often used by catastrophizers. These emotionally laden labels exist only in one’s mind. To quote the old adage, “Nothing is either good or bad but *thinking* makes it so.”

Cognitive deficiency occurs when an important aspect of a life situation is disregarded. One convinces oneself that “it doesn’t matter” when in fact it really *does* matter.

Demanding and commanding are magical beliefs that one’s demands and commands will change others, oneself, or reality. This is also called “shoulding” or “musterbation.”

Dichotomous reasoning involves viewing situations as binary rather than multidimensional. Dichotomous reasoning can involve *all or none* thinking. Rather than seeing in color or in shades of gray, dichotomous thinking involves seeing in black and white.

Disqualifying the positive, a form of minimization, involves negating, minimizing, discounting, or “shooting down” positive experiences for highly personalized reasons.

Magnification occurs when the meaning of an event is exaggerated. *Minor* events are misconstrued to be *major* problems, such as “making a mountain out of a molehill.” Remember, the only difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is how we use them.

Mind reading occurs when a person believes that he or she knows the thoughts or feelings of another person without asking the other person. This cognitive error can contribute to conflicts in relationships.

Minimization occurs when *major* problems are misconstrued as *minor* issues. This type of thinking occurs when one “doesn’t care” or when major important issues “don’t matter,” or “aren’t important.” This error in thinking can also occur when one focuses only on the negative and minimizes the positive aspects of an interaction or situation.

Overgeneralization occurs when a single instance such as failure is viewed as a sign that similar incidents will recur. This type of thinking includes the use of words such as “everybody,” “always,” or “never.” Overgeneralizations such as “you always” or “you never” create conflicts in relationships.

Prophesizing, which is also known as “fortune telling,” occurs when a person “tells the future,” and then consequently acts in a fashion that makes the prediction come true, such as “I won’t succeed.” This type of thinking is also called a “self-fulfilling prophesy.”

Self-Other rating occurs when a person rates global *worth*, rather than rating *traits* of one’s self or others. It can also involve “comparing one’s insides to others’ outsides.” A self-other rating is a form of overgeneralization, which can produce depression, hostility, or feelings of inadequacy.

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