Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions are patterns of negative, non-adaptive ways of thinking. The list below contains some of the more common types of cognitive distortions identified by researchers. Developing your ability to identify cognitive distortions gives you a tool for assessing your thoughts. It also reminds you that you're not alone—other people think this way too. As you read through the list, try to recall thoughts of your own that reflect each type of cognitive distortion. Write them down in the space provided.

Catastrophizing: Believing that what has happened or will happen will be absolutely terrible and result in the worst outcome possible, for example, "I'll never survive the embarrassment if my marriage fails."

Mind Reading: Assuming that you know what other people are thinking, for example, "She hates me."

Fortunetelling: Anticipating a negative outcome for future events, for example, "I'll never make anything of myself."

All-or-nothing Thinking: Viewing people or events in extremes, for example, "I'm a complete failure."

Overgeneralization: Generalizing single events into global patterns of behavior, for example, "I never do anything right" or "He always blames me."

Discounting the Positives: Trivializing positive accomplishments made by you or others, for example, "Anyone could have done that."

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Mental Filtering: Focusing on the negative while ignoring the positives, for example, "I only scored 99% on the exam—I could have done better."

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Personalizing: Blaming yourself for circumstances that are outside of your control or aren't completely your fault, for example, "We would still be together if I were prettier."

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Blaming: Assigning responsibility for your feelings or circumstances to others and refusing to take responsibility for yourself, for example, "It's my mother's fault that I am in the trouble I'm in now."

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Emotional Reasoning: Allowing your emotions guide your interpretation of reality, for example, "I feel guilty, so I must be a bad person."

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Should Statements: Statements about what you or others "should," "ought," or "must" do, for example, "I should be able to control my anxiety," or "My friends should call me on the weekends."

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Bonus: Go back and review the examples of cognitive distortions you recalled from your own life. What types of cognitive distortions do you have most frequently? In what situations do you experience the most distorted thinking? Use this information to help you monitor and assess your thoughts as you keep track of them using your daily thought record.