



Cognitive Distortions

Recognizing twisted thinking and learning practical ways to untwist it

CHECKLIST OF COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

1. All or nothing thinking	You look at things in absolute, black and white categories.
2. Overgeneralization	You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3. Mental Filter	You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives.
4. Discounting the positives	You insist that your accomplishments or positive qualities "don't count."
5. Jumping to conclusions	(A) Mind reading - you assume that people are reacting negatively to you when there's no definite evidence for this; (B) Fortune Telling - you arbitrarily predict things will turn out badly.
6. Magnification or Minimization	You blow things way out of proportion or you shrink their importance inappropriately.
7. Emotional Reasoning	You reason from how you feel: "I feel like an idiot, so I really must be one." Or "I don't feel like doing this, so I'll put it off."
8. "Should Statements"	You criticize yourself or other people with "Shoulds" or "Shouldn'ts." "Musts," "Oughts," "Have tos" are similar offenders.
9. Labeling	You identify with your shortcomings. Instead of saying, "I made a mistake," you tell yourself, "I'm a jerk," or "a fool," or "a loser."
10. Personalization and Blame	You blame yourself for something you weren't entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook ways that your own attitudes and behavior might contribute to a problem.

Copyright © 1980 by David D. Burns, M.D. Adapted from Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1980; Signet, 1981)

Ten Ways to Untwist Your Thinking

Practical methods for examining and responding to negative thoughts

1. Identify the Distortion	Write down your negative thoughts so you can see which of the ten cognitive distortions you're involved in. This will make it easier to think about the problem in a more positive and realistic way.
2. Examine the Evidence	Instead of assuming that your negative thought is true, examine the actual evidence for it. For example, if you feel that you never do anything right, you could list several things you have done successfully.
3. The Double-Standard Method	Instead of putting yourself down in a harsh, condemning way, talk to yourself in the same compassionate way you would talk to a friend with a similar problem.
4. The Experimental Technique	Do an experiment to test the validity of your negative thought. For example, if, during the episode of panic, you become terrified that you're about to die of a heart attack, you could jog or run up and down several flights of stairs. This will prove that your heart is healthy and strong.
5. Thinking in Shades of Grey	Although this method might sound drab, the effects can be illuminating. Instead of thinking about your problems in all-or-nothing extremes, evaluate things on a range of 0 to 100. When things don't work out as well as you hoped, think about the experience as a partial success rather than a complete failure. See what you can learn from the situation.
6. The Survey Method	Ask people questions to find out if your thoughts and attitudes are realistic. For example, if you believe that public speaking anxiety is abnormal and shameful, ask several friends if they ever felt nervous before they gave a talk.
7. Define Terms	When you label yourself "inferior" or "a fool" or "a loser," ask, "What is the definition of a 'fool'?" You will feel better when you see that there is no such thing as a "fool" or a "loser."
8. The Semantic Method	Simply substitute language that is less colorful and emotionally loaded. This method is helpful for "should statements." Instead of telling yourself "I shouldn't have made that mistake," you can say, "It would be better if I hadn't made that mistake."
9. Re-attribution	Instead of automatically assuming that you are "bad" and blaming yourself entirely for a problem, think about the many factors that may have contributed to it. Focus on solving the problem instead of using up all your energy blaming yourself and feeling guilty.
10. Cost-Benefit Analysis	List the advantages and disadvantages of a feeling (like getting angry when your plane is late), a negative thought (like "No matter how hard I try, I always screw up"), or a behavior pattern (like overeating and lying around in bed when you're depressed). You can also use the Cost-Benefit Analysis to modify a self-defeating belief such as, "I must always try to be perfect."

Copyright © 1989 by David D. Burns, M.D., from The Feeling Good Handbook

The Ten Forms of Twisted Thinking

Expanded descriptions and examples

1. All-or-nothing thinking

You see things in black-or-white categories. If a situation falls short of perfect, you see it as a total failure. When a young woman on a diet ate a spoonful of ice cream, she told herself, "I've blown my diet completely." This thought upset her so much that she gobbled down an entire quart of ice cream!

2. Overgeneralization

You see a single negative event, such as a romantic rejection or a career reversal, as a never-ending pattern of defeat by using words such as "always" or "never" when you think about it. A depressed salesman became terribly upset when he noticed bird dung on the windshield of his car. He told himself, "Just my luck! Birds are always crapping on my car!"

3. Mental filter

You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all of reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors a beaker of water. Example: You receive many positive comments about your presentation to a group of associates at work, but one of them says something mildly critical. You obsess about his reaction for days and ignore all the positive feedback.

4. Discounting the positive

You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count." If you do a good job, you may tell yourself that it wasn't good enough or that anyone could have done as well. Discounting the positive takes the joy out of life and makes you feel inadequate and unrewarded.

David, Burns D. *The Feeling Good Handbook*. New York: Plume, 1999. Print.

The Ten Forms of Twisted Thinking (continued)

5. Jumping to conclusions

You interpret things negatively when there are no facts to support your conclusion.

Mind reading: Without checking it out, you arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you.

Fortune-telling: You predict that things will turn out badly. Before a test you may tell yourself, "I'm really going to blow it. What if I flunk?" If you're depressed you may tell yourself, "I'll never get better."

6. Magnification

You exaggerate the importance of your problems and shortcomings, or you minimize the importance of your desirable qualities. This is also called the "binocular trick."

7. Emotional reasoning

You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel terrified about going on airplanes. It must be very dangerous to fly." Or "I feel guilty. I must be a rotten person." Or "I feel angry. This proves I'm being treated unfairly." Or "I feel so inferior. This means I'm a second-rate person." Or "I feel hopeless. I must really be hopeless."

8. "Should statements"

You tell yourself that things should be the way you hoped or expected them to be. After playing a difficult piece on the piano, a gifted pianist told herself, "I shouldn't have made so many mistakes." This made her feel so disgusted that she quit practicing for several days. "Musts," "oughts" and "have tos" are similar offenders.

"Should statements" that are directed against yourself lead to guilt and frustration. Should statements that are directed against other people or the world in general lead to anger and frustration: "He shouldn't be so stubborn and argumentative."

Many people try to motivate themselves with shoulds and shouldn'ts, as if they were delinquents who had to be punished before they could be expected to do anything. "I shouldn't eat that doughnut." This usually doesn't work because all these shoulds and musts make you feel rebellious and you get the urge to do just the opposite. Dr. Albert Ellis has called this "musterbation." I call it the "shouldy" approach to life.

David, Burns D. The Feeling Good Handbook. New York: Plume, 1999. Print.

The Ten Forms of Twisted Thinking (continued)

9. Labeling

Labeling is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. Instead of saying “I made a mistake,” you attach a negative label to yourself: “I’m a loser.” You might also label yourself “a fool” or “a failure” or “a jerk.” Labeling is quite irrational because you are not the same as what you do. Human beings exist, but “fools,” “losers,” and “jerks” do not. These labels are just useless abstractions that lead to anger, anxiety, frustration, and low self-esteem.

You may also label others. When someone does something that rubs you the wrong way, you may tell yourself: “He’s an S.O.B.” Then you feel that the problem is with that person’s “character” or “essence” instead of with their thinking or behavior. You see them as totally bad. This makes you feel hostile and hopeless about improving things and leaves little room for constructive communication.

10. Personalization and blame

Personalization occurs when you hold yourself personally responsible for an event that isn’t entirely under your control. When a woman received a note that her child was having difficulties at school, she told herself, “This shows what a bad mother I am,” instead of trying to pinpoint the cause of the problem so that she could be helpful to her child. When another woman’s husband beat her, she told herself, “If only I were better in bed, he wouldn’t beat me.” Personalization leads to guilt, shame, and feelings of inadequacy.

Some people do the opposite. They blame other people or their circumstances for their problems, and they overlook ways that they might be contributing to the problem: “The reason my marriage is so lousy is because my spouse is totally unreasonable.” Blame usually doesn’t work very well because other people will resent being scapegoated and they will just toss the blame right back in your lap. It’s like the game of hot potato - no one wants to get stuck with it.

David, Burns D. *The Feeling Good Handbook*. New York: Plume, 1999. Print.

Ways to Challenge Automatic Thoughts

Use one or more methods to test the thought and develop a more balanced response

1. Identify the Distortion	2. Examine the Evidence
3. The Double-Standard Method	4. The Experimental Technique
5. Thinking in Shades of Gray	6. The Feared Fantasy Technique
7. The Vertical Arrow Technique	8. Cost-Benefit Analysis
9. Define Terms	10. The Survey Method

AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS

“I’m inferior to all these other men who have such better physiques. If I took my shirt off, everyone would stare at me and think I was abnormal.”

Practice: Select a challenging method above. Write what the method asks you to examine, test, define, or compare.

David, Burns D. The Feeling Good Handbook. New York: Plume, 1999. Print.

Your Thoughts and Feelings

Common emotional experiences and the thoughts or situations often associated with them

Sadness or Depression	Loss, a romantic rejection, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, or the failure to achieve an important personal goal.
Guilt or Shame	You believe that you've hurt someone or that you've failed to live up to your own moral standards. Guilt results from self-condemnation, whereas shame involves fear that you'll lose face when others find out about who you really are.
Anger, Irritation, Annoyance, or Resentment	You feel that someone is treating you unfairly or trying to take advantage of you.
Frustration	Life falls short of your expectations. You insist that things should be different. It might be your own performance ("I shouldn't have made that mistake"), what someone else does ("He should've been on time!"), or an event ("Why does the traffic always slow down when I'm in a hurry?").
Anxiety, Worry, Fear, Nervousness or Panic	You believe you're in danger because you think something bad is about to happen. "What if the plane crashes? What if my mind goes blank when I give my talk in front of all those people? What if this chest pain is the start of a heart attack?"
Inferiority or Inadequacy	You compare yourself to others and conclude that you're not as good as they are because you're not as talented, attractive, charming, successful, intelligent. "She's really got what it takes. She's so cute. All the men are chasing her. I'm just average. There's nothing very special about me."
Loneliness	You tell yourself that you're bound to feel unhappy because you're alone and you aren't getting enough love and attention from others.
Hopelessness or Discouragement	You feel convinced that your problems will go on forever and that things will never improve. "I'll never get over this depression," or "I just can't lose weight and keep it off," or "I'll never find a good job," or "I'll be alone forever."

David, Burns D. The Feeling Good Handbook. New York: Plume, 1999. Print.

This educational resource is intended to support discussion with a qualified mental health professional and does not replace individualized assessment or treatment.