

Cognitive Distortions

<https://psychcentral.com/lib/cognitive-distortions-negative-thinking#filtering>

What is a distortion?

It's an exaggerated pattern of thought that's not based on facts

Your mind convincing you to believe negative things about yourself and your world that are not necessarily true

As humans, our brains naturally go towards the negative, so we have to do a manual override to get them closer to a more neutral reality

All-or-Nothing Thinking

When you think of things in black or white terms, with no shades of gray

*All-or-nothing thinking is at the root of perfectionism.

Example:

This report is either perfect or bad

How to talk back:

It doesn't have to be perfect and that doesn't make it bad. It's somewhere in between

Example:

If I take a drink, I've ruined my recovery

Why is this all-or-nothing thinking?

You're all good or you have nothing

How to talk back:

I'm not all good or all bad. I'm somewhere in between.

My recovery isn't either perfect or ruined. It can be somewhere in between

Overgeneralization

When you overgeneralize something, you take an isolated negative event and turn it into a never-ending pattern of loss and defeat.

You can tell you're overgeneralizing when you use words like "always," "never," "everything," and "nothing."

Example:

Forgetting to go to one of your kid's games and thinking, "I never do anything right!"

If you feel like you never do anything right, what are you likely to stop doing? Trying.

How to talk back:

I do some things wrong but I do a lot of things right, too.

I messed up when I missed my kid's game, but there are other things I get right and I can make sure to go to their games in the future.

Example:

You're running late for work, and on your way there, you hit a red light. You think, "Nothing ever goes my way!"

How would you talk back to this thought?

Mental filtering

When you strain out all positives in a situation and, instead, dwell on its negatives.

Even if there are more positive aspects than negative in a situation or person, you focus on the negatives exclusively.

Example:

You have a performance review where your boss says several positive things about you but also gives you an area you can improve. You leave feeling miserable and can only think about that one negative thing.

How to talk back:

This wasn't all negative - there was some positive in there, too.

They said a negative thing, but they said a lot of positive things, too.

Example:

You go to a party and have lots of fun but you run into someone there that you don't get along with. You leave the party feeling upset.

How is this mental filtering?

You're forgetting about all the fun you had at the party and just focusing on the negative thing.

How to talk back:

I didn't like running into someone I don't get along with, but I also had a lot of fun at the party.

Discounting the Positive

Discounting positives is similar to mental filtering. The main difference is that you dismiss a positive as something of no value.

Example:

If someone compliments the way you look today, you think they're just being nice.

How to talk back:

If they said it, it's likely they meant it. It's good to feel good about it

Example:

If your boss tells you how comprehensive your report was, you discount it as something anyone else could do.

How to talk back:

He wouldn't mention it if everyone could do it. He's noticing that my report stands out. It's good to feel good about it

Example:

If you do well in that job interview, you think it's because they didn't realize you're not that good.

How to talk back:

It's natural to feel that way. My performance was good and they noticed. It's good to feel good about it

Jumping to Conclusions

When you interpret an event or situation negatively without evidence supporting such a conclusion. Then, you react to your assumption.

Example:

Your partner comes home looking serious. Instead of asking how they are, you immediately assume they're mad at you. Consequently, you keep your distance. In reality, your partner had a bad day at work.

How to talk back:

I don't know that's what's going on. Acting like I know that's the case is just making things worse.

Mind-Reading

Mind-Reading is a type of Jumping to Conclusions where you assume that you know what others are thinking

Example:

You feel insecure about your relationship. So, when you see your partner looking serious, you assume they might be losing interest in you.

How to talk back:

I don't know that that's the case. Assuming that's happening is just making me unhappy. It would be good to be curious about it and find out what's really going on.

-OR-

That's the worst-case scenario. What's another scenario?

Example:

People probably think I look stupid in this outfit

How to talk back:

I don't know what others are thinking. Assuming that's happening is just making me unhappy. They're probably not thinking about me much at all

-OR-

That's the worst-case scenario. What's the best-case scenario? The truth is probably somewhere in-between.

Fortune-Telling

Fortune-Telling is a type of Jumping to Conclusions where you assume that you know how events will unfold

Example:

My candidate is going to lose the election and then the country is going to really go down the drain

How to talk back:

I don't know that that's the case. I can't know what's going to happen. It's natural to fear the worst. Everything may be just fine. Assuming it won't be is just making me unhappy.

-OR-

That's the worst-case scenario. What's the best-case scenario? The truth is probably somewhere in-between.

Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing is related to Jumping to Conclusions. In this case, you jump to the worst possible conclusion in every scenario, no matter how improbable it is.

This cognitive distortion often comes with “what if” questions. What if he didn’t call because he got into an accident? What if she hasn’t arrived because she really didn’t want to spend time with me? What if I help this person and they end up betraying or abandoning me?

Several questions might follow in response to one event.

Example:

What if I can’t find a parking spot? What if then I’m late for the important meeting? What if I get fired after I’ve worked so hard for this job?

Example:

What if my candidate loses the election? What if the economy collapses? What if I lose my job? What if I lose my house?

How to talk back:

Yes, it’s possible that thing could happen, but it’s unlikely that it will

... but it wouldn’t be the end of the world

... but I can’t control that and worrying about it is just making me unhappy

-OR-

That’s the worst-case scenario. What’s the best-case scenario? The truth is probably somewhere in-between.

Emotional Reasoning

Emotional reasoning leads you to believe that the way you feel is a reflection of reality. “I feel this way about this situation, hence it must be a fact”.

Example: Just because you feel guilty, it doesn’t mean you did anything wrong.

Example:

Feeling inadequate in a situation turns into, “I don’t belong here.”

This cognitive distortion might also lead you to believe future events depend on how you feel.

Example:

You may firmly believe something bad will happen today because you woke up feeling anxious.

You might also assess a random situation based on your emotional reaction. If someone says something that makes you angry, you immediately conclude that person is treating you poorly.

How is this emotional reasoning?

How to talk back:

I am just thinking these things because of the way I'm feeling. Feeling this way doesn't mean that these things are true.

Shoulds

As cognitive distortions, “should” statements are subjective ironclad rules you set for yourself and others without considering the specifics of a circumstance.

You tell yourself that things should be a certain way with no exceptions.

Examples:

You think people should always be on time. When a friend is late, you become frustrated. Or when you're late, you get upset with yourself instead of cutting yourself some slack.

I should always be independent and never ask for help

People should always like me. So I can't confront him about what he said because then he might not like me

People should know what I need and do it without my having to ask them

Things should always be fair

Or you constantly tell yourself, “You should be better.”

When these things don't happen — they really depend on many factors — you feel guilty, disappointed, let down, or frustrated.

How to talk back:

Holding on to this should is just hurting me and not doing any good. I'd like for things to turn out this way, but they don't have to and that's okay. I'll feel better if I accept things the way they are

This can also come into play when we have regrets

Example:

I should have brought an umbrella! I knew it might rain!

How to talk back:

Turning “I should have” into “I wish”

I wish I had brought an umbrella.

Example:

My dad should have loved me better!

How to talk back:

I wish he had loved me better

Wishes like the one above helps us get in touch with the sadness that needs to be processed, instead of the frustration that is only hurting us

Labeling

Taking a single quality and turning it into an absolute.

This happens when you judge and then define yourself or others based on an isolated event.

The labels assigned are usually negative and extreme.

This is an extreme form of overgeneralization that leads you to judge an action without taking the context into account. This, in turn, leads you to see yourself and others in ways that might not be accurate.

Assigning labels to others can impact how you interact with them. This, in turn, could add friction to your relationships.

Example:

You see your new teammate applying makeup before a meeting, and you call them “shallow.” Or, they don’t submit a report on time, and you label them “useless.”

How to Talk Back:

They did something I didn’t like, but they’re not XYZ. Labeling them is just making it harder to have a positive relationship

When you assign those labels to yourself, it can hurt your self-esteem and confidence, leading you to feel insecure and anxious.

Example:

Why can’t I take better care of my apartment? I’m so lazy

How to talk back:

I’m not lazy. It’s just hard for me to get the motivation to clean. Calling myself lazy will just make me feel lousy and make it harder to accomplish what I want to do

Blaming

When you use blaming, you are either taking too much or too little responsibility for a situation.

With **Self-Blame**, you blame yourself for something you weren't entirely responsible for.

Example:

Your child has an accident, and you blame yourself for allowing them to go to that party.

How to talk back:

I couldn't have known that was going to happen. Blaming myself is only making me feel bad

With **Other-Blame**, you blame others and overlook ways you contributed to the problem.

Example:

"It's not my fault that I failed the test. The teacher didn't explain the material well."

"I didn't get the promotion because my boss doesn't like me."

"My partner is always making me angry."

How to talk back:

Others don't control my situation. I'm in control of myself

Personalization

Personalization leads you to believe that things are more about you than they actually are.

This is often at play when people apologize for things that are not their fault.

Example:

"Oops! Sorry I finished the last piece of pizza! I didn't realize you were coming"

How to talk back:

It's not my fault that she didn't get pizza. I didn't know there was anyone else coming

Example:

Your friend is talking about their personal beliefs regarding parenting, and you take their words as an attack against your parenting style

How to talk back:

She probably isn't thinking about my parenting at all.