Cognitive Distortions – Unhelpful Thinking Styles (Common)

Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) suggests that how we think affects how we feel. Everyone has hundreds of 'automatic' thoughts each day. These thoughts can be positive (they lead to positive emotions like joy or excitement), negative (they lead to negative emotions like sadness or anxiety), or neutral (they don't make you feel much at all).

Our automatic thoughts can also be biased: not every thought is 100% true. Because your thoughts affect how you feel, biased thinking can contribute to emotional difficulties, like anxiety and depression.

People think in all sorts of biased ways. Therapists call these biases 'unhelpful thinking styles' or 'cognitive distortions'. Being aware of these distortions can help you understand why you experience changes in your mood and behavior. Knowing about them can also help you to evaluate how accurate and helpful your automatic thoughts are.

This information handout will familiarize you with the most common cognitive distortions and help you to identify the ones that are most relevant to you.

How could this tool help me?

★ It will help you to learn about the most common cognitive distortions.
★ It will help you identify the distortions you tend to experience.
★ Knowing about these biases can help you notice and address them as they occur.
★ Being aware of your unhelpful thinking styles can help you to think in more accurate ways and improve your mood.

How should I use it?

★ Read through the list of cognitive distortions and identify the ones that seem most relevant to you. People aren't always aware of their unhelpful thinking styles, so your therapist might help you to do this.

★ Once you're familiar with these cognitive distortions, try to notice them when they happen throughout your day.

Helpful tips

★ Keep the list of cognitive distortions nearby. Whenever you notice a change in your mood or behavior, read over the list and see if you might have experienced one or more of them.
★ If you spot a distortion in your thinking, see if you can reverse it. For example, if you are 'fortune telling' ask yourself whether anyone can predict the future with 100% accuracy.
★ See if there are patterns in your thinking. Do certain situations tend to trigger particular distortions?

Dear Eliza

Cognitive Distortions – Unhelpful Thinking Styles (Common)

We all have automatic thoughts – thoughts that happen so quickly and effortlessly that we might not even be aware we've had them. When we assume they're true, we feel strong emotions (such as fear, anger, or shame) and can react equally severely. Automatic thoughts may feel convincing, but they are often exaggerated or distorted by certain biases, which psychologists call cognitive distortions or unhelpful thinking styles. Here are 10 of the most common biases:

All or nothing thinking

You think in extremes about situations, other people, or yourself. Your thoughts might be polarized: things are either 'perfect' or 'terrible'. You may also act in just as extreme ways, veering between extreme effort and none at all.
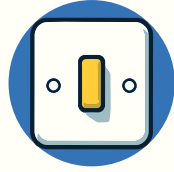
Magnification And Minimization

You exaggerate negative aspects of yourself, other people, or situations, while downplaying the positive aspects. Bad things get blown out of proportion, whilst good things seem unimportant.

Disqualifying the positive

You ignore, dismiss, or discount your positive attributes and experiences. Receiving positive feedback might feel strange or uncomfortable to you, so you automatically reject it.

Mental Filter

You base your conclusions on a single detail taken out of context, and might ignore or discount other bits of information. People tend to filter when they are faced with evidence that doesn't 'fit' with their beliefs.
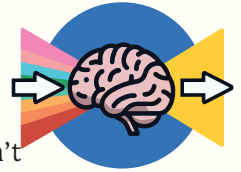
Emotional reasoning

You assume something must be true because you feel it strongly. Your feelings, hunches, or instincts guide how you interpret a situation.

Overgeneralization

You make a sweeping judgment or conclusion based on just one experience or a small number of incidents. You believe an isolated event will become a pattern and repeat itself in the future.

Jumping to conclusions

You make hasty judgments or decisions based on a limited amount of information. You might assume you know what other people are thinking, or use your intuition to make snap judgments.

Personalizing

You assume that situations or outcomes are related to you, especially negative ones. You might unfairly believe that you caused things to happen.

Labeling

You give yourself, other people, or your experiences a one-word label. These labels are usually fixed, extreme, and negative – they stir up strong emotional reactions and stop you noticing other aspects of your experience.

"Should" statements

Your style of thinking focuses on "must", "should", "ought to", and "have to" statements. It leads to fixed ideas about how you, other people, and the world should be.