



Self-Help Form

Learning About Cognitive Distortions (11 Ways to make Yourself Miserable)

Cognitive distortions are inaccuracies in our thinking. We can think of our thoughts as representations of reality, sort of like a photograph. If we have a smudge on the lens of the camera, then the photo will show a picture that does not accurately represent what was in front of the camera. Even if the lens is clear but we take a picture of only part of an object, then the picture will not accurately portray the whole object. It is safe to assume that everyone engages in cognitive distortions at times, especially during times of distress. It can be very helpful to be able to identify distortions in your thinking, because once you have discovered the distortion, you will know how to correct it and feel better. Identifying your cognitive distortions is like diagnosing the thought problem. A good diagnosis usually points to a helpful remedy. Below is a list of eleven common distortions with examples of how they might occur. See if you can identify one or more ways that you have engaged in this kind of thinking.

All or Nothing / Black or White: Seeing things as though there were only two possible categories.

Example: If a situation turns out imperfectly, you see it as a total failure. You forget to buy one item on a shopping list and think, “Well, I really blew that trip.” Can you think of an example of how you have used this distortion?

Try writing it down below:

Overgeneralizing: A negative event is seen as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat.

Example: When shopping you notice that your check-out line is moving very slowly and think, “Why do I always pick the slowest line?”

Your example:

Mental Filter: Seeing only negative aspects of a situation while screening out the positive aspects.

Example: You focus on a critical comment a client made while ignoring all the positive feedback you received.

Your example:

Jumping to Conclusions: Predicting things will go a certain way before you have the facts.

Example: You hear that the agency will be cutting back on staff, and you assume you will be among the first to go.

Your example:

Mind-Reading: Assuming that you know exactly what someone is or will be thinking about you.

Example: A colleague doesn't seem as friendly as usual and you think, "He must be angry with me."

Your example:

Fortune-telling: Predicting that things will turn out badly and that you won't be able to cope.

Example: Before going into a therapy session, you have an image of a client reacting negatively to something you say, and you assume that you will be bothered by this.

Your example:

Magnifying or Minimizing: Over-valuing or minimizing the importance of a situation or certain information.

Example: Even though you may be an effective helper, you are upset by the one client who terminated because he didn't feel he was being helped.

Your example:

Emotional Reasoning: Assuming that how you feel is an accurate reflection of how things are.

Example: If you are feeling anxious, you assume that something bad is going to happen.

Your example:

Shoulds: You tell yourself things “should” or “shouldn’t” be a certain way. We do this with ourselves, with other people and situations. Variations of this can include “musts”, “have to’s” and other imperatives which sound like they come from some authority figure.

Example: “I shouldn’t have done that” or, “I must prepare better for meetings.”

Your example:

Labeling: This is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking which can be damaging to our self-esteem and our relationships.

Example: Instead of simply acknowledging a mistake, we say, “I’m such a screw-up” (substitute “loser”, “idiot,” “jerk,” etc.). Applying labels to ourselves or others (“that SOB”) will tend to blind us to other qualities which we or others have.

Your example:

Personalizing (Blaming): This distortion creates enormous preventable suffering. It occurs when we hold ourselves responsible for something that isn’t or wasn’t entirely under our control. When this process is reversed, we blame someone else entirely for a situation we have a part in creating.

Example: Someone who noticed a colleague who didn’t seem as friendly as usual thought, “I must have done something wrong.”

Your example:
