

# Cognitive Therapy for Controlling Distorted Thinking and Automatic Negative Thoughts

Almost everyone has given in to a type of distorted thinking at one time or another. As you look at the list below, you may well recognize one or more from your own experience, but more likely from something you've seen in someone you know. There are situations in which a pattern of such distortions lead us to experience the world in ways that can worsen feelings of anxiety, anger, or depression. These patterns are usually very well hidden from ourselves, but more obvious to those around us.

When we can catch ourselves in our own patterns of distorted thinking, we give ourselves the opportunity to replace the old thinking with a more rational alternative. In this way, we can start to move away from the distortions and closer to a more realistic way of experiencing the world. These "rational comebacks" are listed further down this page.

## The 15 Styles of Distorted Thinking

1. **Filtering:** You take the negative details and magnify them while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation.
2. **Polarized Thinking:** Things are black and white, good or bad. You have to be perfect or you're a failure. There is no middle ground.
3. **Over Generalization:** You come to a general conclusion based on a single incident or piece of evidence. If something bad happens once, you expect it to happen over and over again.
4. **Mind Reading:** Without their saying so, you know what people are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, you are able to divine how people are feeling toward you.
5. **Catastrophizing:** You expect disaster. You notice or hear about a problem and start "what if's:" What if tragedy strikes? What if it happens to you?
6. **Personalization:** Thinking that everything people do or say is some kind of reaction to you. You also compare yourself to others, trying to determine who's smarter, better looking, etc.
7. **Control Fallacies:** If you feel externally controlled, you see yourself as helpless, a victim of fate. The fallacy of internal control has you responsible for the pain and happiness of everyone around you.
8. **Fallacy of Fairness:** You feel resentful because you think you know what's fair, but other people won't agree with you.
9. **Blaming:** You hold other people responsible for your pain, or take the other tack and blame yourself for every problem or reversal.
10. **Shoulds:** You have a list of ironclad rules about how you and other people should act. People who break the rules anger you and you feel guilty if you violate the rules.
11. **Emotional Reasoning:** You believe that what you feel must be true -- automatically. If you *feel* stupid and boring, then you must *be* stupid and boring.
12. **Fallacy of Change:** You expect that other people will change to suit you if you just pressure or cajole them enough. You need to change people because your hopes for happiness seem to depend entirely on them.
13. **Global Labeling:** You generalize one or two qualities in a negative global judgment.

14. **Being Right:** You are continually on trial to prove that your opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and you will go to any length to demonstrate your rightness.
15. **Heaven's Reward Fallacy:** You expect all your sacrifice and self-denial to pay off, as if there were someone keeping score. You feel bitter when the reward doesn't come.

## Rational Comebacks

Listed below are rational correlatives to the fifteen distorted thinking styles. It isn't necessary to read through the list from beginning to end. Use it as a reference when you are having problems with a particular distortion. The key comeback statements for each distortion are listed underneath in bulleted boldface.

### 1. Filtering

- **No need to magnify**
- **Shift focus**

You have been stuck in a mental groove, focusing on things from your environment that typically tend to frighten, sadden, or anger you. To conquer filtering you will have to deliberately shift focus. You can shift focus in two ways: First, place your attention on coping strategies to deal with the problem rather than obsessing about the problem itself. Second, categorize your primary mental theme as: Loss, Injustice, or \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in your own theme). If your theme is loss, focus instead on what you do have that is of value. If your theme is danger, focus on things in your environment that represent comfort and safety. If your theme is injustice (including stupidity, incompetence, etc.), shift your attention to what people do that does meet with your approval.

When you are filtering you usually end up magnifying your problems. To combat magnifying, stop using words like terrible, awful, disgusting, horrendous, etc. In particular, banish the phrase "I can't stand it." You can stand it, because history shows that human beings can survive almost any psychological blow and can endure incredible physical pain. You can get used to and cope with almost anything. Try saying to yourself phrases such as "No need to magnify" and "I can cope."

### 2. Polarized Thinking

- **No black and white judgments**
- **Think in percentages**

The key to overcoming polarized thinking is to stop making black or white judgments. People are not either happy or sad, loving or rejecting, brave or cowardly, smart or stupid. They fall somewhere along a continuum. They are a little bit of each. Human beings are just too complex to be reduced to dichotomous judgments. If you have to make these kinds of ratings, think in terms of percentages: "About 30% of me is scared to death, and 70% is holding on and coping . . . about 60% of the time he seems terribly preoccupied with himself, but there's the 40% when he can be really generous . . . 5% of the time I'm an ignoramus, the rest of the time I do all right."

### 3. Over Generalization

- **Quantify**
- **Evidence for conclusions? There are no absolutes**

Over Generalization is simply the tendency to exaggerate, the propensity to take a button and sew a vest on it. You can fight this tendency by quantifying instead of using words like huge, awful, massive, miniscule, etc. Moreover, you can examine how much evidence you really have for your conclusion. If the conclusion is based on one or two cases, a single mistake, or one small symptom, then throw it out till you have more convincing proof. Use this variant of the three column technique:

Evidence for my conclusion	Evidence against my conclusion	Alternative conclusion
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If you over generalize, you think in absolutes. You should therefore avoid statements and assumptions that require the use of words such as "every," "all," "always," "none," "never," "everybody," and "nobody." Thoughts and statements that include these words ignore the exceptions and shades of gray. To become more flexible, use instead words such as "may," "sometimes," and "often." Be particularly sensitive to absolute predictions about the future such as, "No one will ever love me." They are extremely dangerous because they can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

### 4. Mind Reading

- **Check it out**
- **Evidence for conclusion?**

Mind reading is the tendency to make inferences about how people feel and think. In the long run, you are probably better off making no inferences about people at all. Either believe what they tell you or hold no belief at all until some conclusive evidence comes your way. Treat all of your notions about people as hypotheses to be tested and checked out by asking them. If you lack direct information from the person involved, but have other evidence, evaluate your conclusion using the three column technique above.

### 5. Catastrophizing

- **Realistic odds**

Catastrophizing is the royal road to anxiety. As soon as you catch yourself, make an honest assessment of the situation in terms of odds or percent of probability. Is the chance one in 100,000 (0.001%)? One in a thousand (0.1%)? One in twenty (5%)? Looking at odds helps you realistically evaluate whatever is frightening you.

### 6. Personalization

- **Check it out**
- **Evidence for conclusion? Why risk comparisons?**

If your tendency is to personalize, force yourself to prove what the boss's frown has to do with you. Check it out. If you can't ask the person, use the three column technique shown above to test your conclusions. Make no conclusions unless you are satisfied that you have reasonable evidence and proof. It is also important to abandon the habit of comparing yourself — negatively or positively — with other people. Comparisons are an exciting form of gambling. Sometimes you win and really outshine someone else. But when you lose, you set yourself up for a blow to your self-esteem and maybe the beginning of a long, deep depression. Your worth doesn't depend on being better than others, so why start the comparison gamble?

## 7. Control Fallacies

- **I make it happen**
- **Each one is responsible**

Aside from natural disasters, you are responsible for what happens in your world. You make it happen. If you are unhappy there are specific choices you have made, and continue to make, that have the byproduct of unhappiness. You usually achieve in life whatever your top priority is. For example, if security is more important than anything else, you may have it at the expense of passion and excitement. You may long for excitement, but security was the higher priority. Ask yourself, "What choices have I made that resulted in this situation? What decisions can I make now to change it?"

The omnipotence fallacy is the opposite side of the coin from the external control fallacy. Instead of everyone else being responsible for your problems, you are responsible for everyone else's problems. If someone is in pain, it's your responsibility to do something about it. The fault is with you if you don't take up the burdens of others. The key to overcoming the omnipotence fallacy is to recognize that each one is responsible for himself. We are all captains of our own ships, making the decisions that steer our lives. If someone is in pain, he or she has the ultimate responsibility to overcome or accept it. There is a difference between generosity and the slavish adherence to a conviction that you have to help everybody. Also remember, part of respecting others includes letting them live their own lives, suffer their own pains, and solve their own problems.

## 8. Fallacy of Fairness

- **Preference vs. fairness**

Outside of a court of law, the concept of fairness is too dangerous to use. The word fair is a nice disguise for personal preferences and wants. What you want is fair, what the other person wants is bogus. Be honest with yourself and the other person. Say what you want or prefer without dressing it up in the fallacy of fairness.

## 9. Blaming

- **I make it happen**
- **Each one is responsible**

It is your responsibility to assert your needs, say no, or go elsewhere. The other person is not responsible for knowing or helping you meet your needs. No one else can really be at fault if you, a responsible adult, are distressed or unhappy. Focus on the choices you have made that created this situation. Examine what options you have now for coping with it.

There is a difference between taking responsibility and turning the blame on yourself. Taking responsibility means accepting the consequences of your own choices. Blaming yourself means attacking your own self-esteem and labeling yourself bad if you make a mistake. Taking responsibility doesn't imply that you are also responsible for what happens to others. Blaming yourself for another person's problems is a form of self-aggrandizement. It means you think you are having more impact on their lives than they are.

## 10. Shoulds

- **Flexible rules**
- **Flexible values**

Re-examine and question any personal rules or expectations that include the words should, ought, or must. Flexible rules and expectations don't use these words because there are always exceptions and special circumstances. Think of at least three exceptions to your rule, and then imagine all the exceptions there must be that you can't think of.

You may get irritated when people don't act according to your values. But your personal values are just that — personal. They may work for you but, as missionaries have discovered all over the world, they don't always work for others. People just aren't all the same.

The key is to focus on each person's uniqueness, his or her particular needs, limitations, fears, and pleasures. Because it is impossible to know all of these complex interrelations even with intimates, you can't be certain whether your values apply to another. You are entitled to an opinion, but allow for the possibility of being wrong. Also, allow for other people to find different things important.

## 11. Emotional Reasoning

- **Feelings can lie**

What you feel is entirely dependent on what you think. If you have distorted thoughts, your feelings won't have validity. Your feelings can lie to you. In fact, if you're feeling depressed or anxious all the time, it's almost certain they are lying to you. There is nothing sacred or automatically true about what you feel. If you feel unattractive or feel foolish and embarrassed,

you tend to believe yourself ugly or a fool. But stop a minute. Maybe it isn't true and you are suffering for nothing. Be skeptical about your feelings and examine them as you would a used car.

## 12. Fallacy of Change

- **I make it happen**

When you try to push people to change, you are asking them to be different so you can be happy. The assumption is that your happiness is in some way dependent on them and on how they behave. Your happiness depends on you, on each of the decisions you make. You have to decide whether to leave or stay, work as a baker or an electrician, say yes or no. Each person makes it happen for him or herself. It's dangerous to ask someone else to make it happen for you because people resist when they are pressured to change. If they do change they often resent the person who made them change.

## 13. Global Labeling

- **Be specific**

Global labels are usually false because they focus on only a single characteristic or behavior but imply that it's the whole picture. Rather than applying global labels, you can limit your observations to a specific case. Ask yourself if a case is always true, only true now, or only true some of the time.

## 14. Being Right

- **Active listening**

If you've always got to be right, you don't listen. You can't afford to. Listening might lead you to conclude that you are wrong sometimes. The key to overcoming being right is active listening. As an active listener you participate in communication by repeating what you think you've heard in order to make sure you really understand what's been said to you. This checking out process helps two people who disagree to appreciate each other's point of view. A proportionately greater amount of time is spent trying to understand the other person than in devising your own rebuttals and attacks. Remember that other people believe what they are saying as strongly as you believe in your convictions and that there is not always one right answer. Focus on what you can learn from the other person's opinion.

## 15. Heaven's Reward Fallacy

- **The reward is now**

This distorted thinking style accepts pain and unhappiness because those who do good are rewarded in the end. But if doing good means you are doing things you don't want to do and

sacrificing things you resent giving up, then you are likely to reap no reward at all. You'll become so bitter and unhappy that people will steer clear of you.

In reality, the reward is now. Your relationships, your progress toward your goals, and the care you give to people you love should be intrinsically rewarding. Most days, your emotional bank balance should be in the black. If you are drained, running in the red ink for days or weeks at a time, something is wrong. You need to arrange your activities to provide some here-and-now reward, dropping or sharing the activities that chronically drain you. Heaven is a long way off and you can get very tired waiting.

It is part of your responsibility to those you care about not to do things that will lead you to feel resentful. Remember that you wouldn't want others doing things for you that they didn't want to do.

### **Negative Thoughts**

There are a number of anxiety conditions in which a person is burdened with unwelcome negative thoughts that keep coming up. Attempts to simply "stop thinking" about these distorted thoughts can be frustrating when they fail to work. Often, such thoughts are distorted in some way that does not fully match-up with reality, making the thoughts worse. For example, a person might have the automatic thought, "My work quality is horrible, and I'm going to be fired for it."

Whenever an unwanted negative thought comes back, you can pull out a sheet of paper and write in the following information, step by step. In this way, you interrupt the flow of the negative thought and add in corrections. With many repeats, you can start to reduce how often and how badly the negative thoughts come, and build in an "automatic balanced thought" that is less distressing.

This worksheet is a type of "Cognitive Therapy" that works through repetition to retrain the automatic thoughts you may have and bring your thoughts back under your own control. Be aware that this type of exercise is expected to be emotionally challenging, and results do not start right away. It is so much the better if you can do this exercise while anxious and upset by your automatic negative thought. The higher level of adrenaline that is present with anxiety works to enhance the effect. This is partly why our memories of times that we were very scared or anxious tend to be stronger.

## Worksheet for Reducing Automatic Negative Thoughts

1. Date and Time: \_\_\_\_\_

2. The complete automatic thought:

\_\_\_\_\_

3. On a scale from 0 to 100, how much do you feel line #2 to be correct? \_\_\_\_\_

4. List 3 or more facts that support line #2:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. List 3 or more facts that do not support line #2:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Write out a different idea or a different way of looking at things that takes the facts into account:

\_\_\_\_\_

7. On a scale from 0 to 100, how much do you feel line #2 to be correct? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Say line #6 out loud.