

Checklist of common cognitive distortions

Cognitive distortions are biased ways of thinking.

These often reflect quirks of how human brains work, like:

- over-focusing on perceived threats and negativity
- making judgments with only partial information
- over-generalizing (i.e., taking a specific situation and making it about everything)

If you notice you (or your client) have one or more of these common cognitive distortions listed here, don't be alarmed: It's normal.

Instead, treat whatever you discover as helpful information. Realizing what our brains are doing can help us revise our initial yet inaccurate ideas about the world into thoughts and beliefs that are more realistic.

Common cognitive distortions

1. **All-or-nothing thinking:** Restricting possibilities and options to only two choices: yes or no (all or nothing).
2. **Over-generalization:** Viewing a single, negative event as a continuing and never-ending pattern of defeat: "This always happens."
3. **Negative mental filter:** Dwelling mostly on the negatives and generally ignoring the positives.
4. **Discounting the positives:** Insisting that achievements or positive efforts don't count.
5. **Jumping to conclusions:**
 - a. **Mind-reading:** Imagining what other people are thinking, often assuming that people are reacting negatively to you without any objective evidence.
 - b. **Fortune-telling:** Predicting that things will turn out badly without any objective evidence.
6. **Magnification or minimization:** Blowing things way out of proportion or minimize their importance.
7. **Emotional reasoning:** Basing one's account of reality on feelings: "I feel like a loser, so I must be one."
8. **"Mustabatory thinking" or "Shoulding all over yourself":** Criticizing yourself or other people with "musts," "shoulds," "oughts," and "have tos."
9. **Labeling:** Instead of saying "I made a mistake," telling yourself "I'm an idiot" or "I'm a loser."
10. **Personalization:** You imagine that you're directly responsible for others' feelings and responses, and take everything as a personal commentary on your value as a human.
11. **Blame:** Finding fault instead of solving the problem.
 - a. **Self-blame:** Blaming yourself almost completely for something for which you were not entirely responsible.
 - b. **Other-blame:** Blaming others and overlook the ways you contributed to the problem.

Adapted from:

Burns D. Feeling Great: The Revolutionary New Treatment for Depression and Anxiety. Eau Claire, WI: PESI Publishing & Media; 2020.
Burns DD. Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy. Harper Collins; 2012.