

COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

IRRATIONAL (MALADAPTIVE AND ILLOGICAL) THOUGHT PROCESSES, OR... SIX MIND GAMES WE ALL PLAY WITH OURSELVES

- 1) **All-or-None Thinking** (a.k.a. **Dichotomous Thinking, Polarized Thinking**): You look at things in absolute, black and white categories, ignoring other possibilities that might lie on a spectrum somewhere in between or outside of the two categories. (Examples: “You’re either for me or against me,” excluding other possibilities such as being neutral or having mixed thoughts or feelings for or against; or “You’re either part of the problem, or part of the solution,” excluding the possibility that someone could in some ways contribute to a problem and in other ways contribute to a solution.)
- 2) **Jumping to Conclusions**: You draw a conclusion somewhat prematurely based on very limited information
 - a. **Overgeneralizing**: You make a sweeping negative conclusion that goes far beyond the current situation. (Example: “I was so lost in class today. I can’t do math,” generalizing confusion about one particular math-related topic on one day to all math-related topics on all days.)
 - b. **Mind Reading**: You believe you know what others are thinking or feeling while failing to consider other more likely possibilities. (Example: “They don’t think I know what I’m doing” when giving a presentation you are nervous about, ignoring the possibility that others think you’re doing fine or aren’t particularly focused on evaluating you one way or the other.)
 - c. **Catastrophizing** (a.k.a. **Fortune Telling, Awfulizing**): You predict the future negatively and/or exaggerate the negative aspect of a situation without considering other more likely outcomes. (Examples: “I’m going to screw this up;” “I’m going to be late, my boss will get mad, I’ll get fired, I won’t be able to pay the bills, and I’ll end up homeless!”)
- 3) **Labeling**: You apply a fixed, global, or absolute label to yourself or others, often taking the form of name-calling. (Example: “I’m such an idiot!” after spilling a drink on the carpet, or “What a jerk” after another driver almost hits you on the road because he or she didn’t check a “blind spot” before trying to merge.) Labeling can be a form of jumping to conclusions, all-or-none thinking, or both.
- 4) **Magnifying or Minimizing**: You magnify one aspect of a situation and/or minimize other aspects. This can include:
 - a. **Mental Filter** (a.k.a. **Filtering, Selective Abstraction, Tunnel Vision, Confirmation Bias**): Paying undue attention to one or a small number of pieces of information while ignoring or failing to see the whole picture. (Example: “My presentation sucked” after receiving some constructive criticism from one or two attendees even though a dozen others gave you excellent reviews, ratings, and compliments.)
 - b. **Disqualifying/Discounting the Positive**: You unreasonably tell yourself that positive experiences, deeds, or qualities do not count (Example: “I only got a positive evaluation because my boss was being nice;” “I only met my quota because I got lucky.”)
- 5) **Personalizing and Blaming**: You believe others are behaving, thinking, acting or feeling a certain way because of you, without considering other more plausible explanations for their behavior (Personalization). Conversely, you may blame others for your thoughts, feelings, or behaviors while overlooking ways that your own attitudes and behavior might contribute to a problem (Blaming). (Examples: “What did I ever do to him to make him look at me that way?” “You’re making me so mad!”)
- 6) **Imperatives** (a.k.a. **Shoulding/Shoulds, Must Statements, Absolutes, Dogmatic Demands**): You have a list of solid, absolute, rigid, inflexible, unreasonable, or ironclad rules and assumptions about how you or others should think, feel, or act. This distortion often contributes to perfectionism or a strong need for control. (Example: “I have to get this right” or “You need to stop doing that.”) Imperatives can be converted into healthier thoughts called *personal preferences*, such as “I’d like/prefer to...,” “I believe that...;” “I think...” or “I want you to ...”).
- 7) **Emotional Reasoning**: You think something must be true because you “feel” (actually believe) it strongly, ignoring or discounting evidence to the contrary. In some, it is experienced in relation to deeply held core beliefs that may connect to early developmental experiences that evoke strong emotion. (Example: I make good grades, have won several academic honors, and score high on standardized tests, but I still feel like I’m stupid; like I’m just not good enough.)

Adopted from (1) *Cognitive Therapy: Basics and Beyond* by Dr. Judith Beck, (2) *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* by Dr. David Burns, and (3) *A Guide to Rational Living* by Dr. Albert Ellis