

Cognitive Distortions

We all tend to think in extremes...and when traumatic events happen we think that way even more. Here are some common cognitive distortions. Take a look and see if any of them are getting in your way.

1. **All-or-nothing thinking:** You see things in black and white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure. You either feel totally bad or must feel totally good to have a good day.
2. **Overgeneralization:** You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. On the basis of one problem or negative experience, you feel that everything is wrong (with you, or with another person who interacts with you). You can tell by using the words *always* or *never* or *absolutely*, etc.
3. **Mental filter:** You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors the entire beaker of water. You only notice the one negative factor in a situation that might also have many positive elements.
4. **Disqualifying the positive (or not celebrating it):** You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or other. You maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences. When something good happens you underrate it or ignore it with "Oh, anyone could have done that" or "I should have also done...."
5. **Jumping to conclusions:** You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.

Mind reading: You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you and don't bother to check it out. "I assumed she would call today, but she didn't so she must be angry with me."

The Fortune Teller Error: You anticipate that things will turn out badly and feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact. "Since I feel depressed today, I will probably be miserable the rest of my life."

6. **Magnification (catastrophizing) or minimization:** You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up or someone else's achievement), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other fellow's imperfections). This is also called the "binocular trick." Blowing negative events of characteristics out of proportion. "Since I forgot my appointment, I'm probably getting Alzheimer's."
7. **Emotional reasoning:** You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true." You react with anger to a situation, and assume some person has intended to hurt you. You allow your emotional state to misinterpret to misinterpret the situation, instead of clarifying it with the other person.

8. **Should statements:** Setting up arbitrary requirements for yourself and others which cause feelings of guilt and disappointment if they aren't met. You try to motivate yourself with "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts", as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. "Musts" and "oughts" are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment. "I should be able to do 25 pushups a day," or "She should know how I feel."
9. **Labeling and mislabeling:** Naming yourself or others foolish or incompetent on the basis of a single mistake. Ignoring the many other sensible things you or the other person does. This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a loser." When someone else's behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him, "He's a damn louse." Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.
10. **Personalization:** Feeling responsible for situations that you have no control over. You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event for which, in fact, you were not primarily responsible. Blaming yourself for a physical characteristic you don't like, or blaming yourself if your spouse is in a bad mood or cheats on you.

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