

# MASTERING COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

You have a fallible brain that constantly and inevitably makes mistakes. Isn't that great?! This means that we don't have to be perfect because we can't be perfect anyway. We are fully fallible human beings who learn from mistakes—our own and those of others.

Now our cognitive filters determine *how we make sense of things and create meaning about things*. These are our filters or thinking patterns and they inevitably control how we think, understand, perceive, and even experience things. Cognitive distortions refer to those thinking patterns that create distorted representations, thoughts, beliefs, decisions, and then emotions. And these are the filters that make our way of constructing meaning itself sick and dis-empowering. As thinking patterns, any and every cognitive distortion create limitations and emotional misery.

These are mostly *primitive ways of thinking* which we learn as children. And they create faulty perceptions that get us in trouble. So, as adults, when we use these thinking patterns to reason, we inevitably create ill-formed and inaccurate mental models that imprison us in non-sense and limiting possibilities. Use the following Cognitive Distortions as a *check-list* of the thinking patterns *in the back of your mind* that you use to construct meaning and explain things. Step back and ask: What is the thinking pattern or perceptual filter informing my thinking and feeling? When you can simply recognize them for what they are, then you can truly know: *The problem is the frame, not me*. This will give you a great first step to clarity and choice. Cognitive distortions set up your “buttons” so that certain things can *get* you and rattle you. Then you react in unthinking and defensive ways.

You lie to yourself when you don't tell the truth. When you misrepresent reality, when you give only part of the truth, when you twist and distort the truth, in these and many other ways—*you lie*. What you say or present is not “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” The difference that this makes depends on the degree of distortion and the effect it has on you and others. If you misrepresent value as Madoff did for years in his scheme to cheat billions out of others, you can create tremendous harm.

We often lie about where we were, what we did, or didn't do. We lie to excuse ourselves, to put ourselves in a more positive light. We lie to escape responsibility. All that is *content* lies. Yet above and beyond those detail lies are a higher form of lies— *meta-lies*. In fact, a fact of reality that true at the primary level can become a lie—a distortion, a delusion, an illusion, a misrepresentation.

**Cognitive Clearing and Enriching:** To unleash our best potentials we have to grow beyond the simplicity of childish thinking. As we mentally grow, we develop an expanded philosophical understanding of things as well as more sophisticated critical thinking skills. The following thinking patterns enable us to create more accurate and useful mental maps. With them we can counter the older ways of thinking that *distort* our perceptions and experience an expanded and higher level of consciousness that empowers, unleashes, and actualizes. This endows us with the ability to create richer and more robust meanings.

So, are you now ready to clean up your thinking and style of meaning construction?

<i>Cognitive Distortions</i>	<i>Problems Created that Sabotage</i>	<i>Solutions for an Empowering Response</i>
<p>1. <i>Over-generalizing — Jumping to Conclusions</i>  <i>Making things Pervasive</i>            Taking only a few facts, or none at all, and jumping to premature conclusions and assuming them to be true. Assuming that a negative experience in one area pervades every aspect of life. Creates false cause-effect structures.</p>	<p><i>Limits finer distinctions</i>  <i>Hides critical success factors.</i>  <i>Blinds to possibilities for solution</i></p>	<p><i>Contextual thinking</i>            Inquire about the context of the information and index by asking: what, when, where, which, who, and why? Ask about vague terms and unspecified nouns and verbs.             Outcome: clarity and precision.</p>
<p>2. <i>All-or-nothing thinking — Making things pervasive</i>            Polarizing at extremes, hence, black-or-white thinking. Either-or thinking that posits options as two-valued choices, either this or that. Gives no other choices, nothing in the middle. Aristotle's "excluded middle."</p>	<p><i>Eliminates and hides all values in between the polar choices.</i>  <i>Sets up extremes as in manic-depression</i>  <i>Undermines creativity and choices.</i>  <i>Creates obsessions, compulsions.</i></p>	<p><i>Both-and Thinking: In-between thinking</i>            Test situation to see if there is some option in-between the extremes. To what degree? Gauge for percentages, scale from 0 to 10. Check contexts.             Outcome: expands choice</p>
<p>3. <i>Labeling — Name Calling</i>            Assuming that a name or label can accurately</p>	<p><i>Sells a person short by putting into</i></p>	<p><i>Map-Territory thinking, Reality-testing thinking</i>            Ask: Is this just a label, just a word?</p>

and adequately describe something. Labeling over-generalizes to reduce reality to just a word, confusing a verbal map with the territory.

*a box and assuming that's all the person is.  
Hides reality in a label.*

Explore: In what way is it bad, undesirable? What are you referring to? When? Where? Under what conditions?

*Outcome: more accurate mapping.*

#### 4. Blaming

Accusatory thinking that transfers blame and responsibility for a problem to someone or something else.

*Limits recognizing response-ability.  
Wastes energy accusing someone.  
Blinds one to responses for change.  
Impairs power of responsibility.*

*Responsibility / Denominalizing / systemic thinking*

Ask: what am I response-able for? To whom? Is this a response that others make?

Question the *nominalization* – What is the process? The action? What action has been “named” (nominalized)?

What is the system? Who is in it? How does the system work?

*Outcome: Clarity, see processes rather than things.*

#### 5. Mind-reading

Projecting thoughts, feelings, intuitions onto others without checking our guesses with the person, over-trusting our "intuitions" about other people and seeing them through the lens of our mental filters rather than checking out our interpretations and assumptions.

*Limits seeing and dealing with a person based on facts of sensory data.  
Projects beliefs onto others.*

*Sensory thinking*

What are the facts? See-hear-feel facts?

Ask: How do you know that? How draw that conclusion? What are the probabilities?

What are you feeling or thinking?

*Outcome: straightens out relationship, encourages dialogue, keep things present.*

#### 6. Propheying — Making things Permanent

Projecting negative outcomes into the future without seeing alternatives or possible ways to proactively intervene. Seeing problems and hurts as permanent, and never-ending.

*Limits hope, belief, vision, dreaming, possibilities.  
Makes problems permanent and so eliminates solutions.*

*Tentative thinking in predicting*

Study trends, factors, and causes that contribute to an experience. Study consequences and probabilities.

*Outcome: Opens future, identifies leverage points, increase ability to influence.*

#### 7. Emotionalizing — Wishful thinking

Taking counsel of one's emotions as an

*Limits choice by creating an*

*Observational / Witnessing thinking*

Step back and just observe. Witness senses,

infallible source for reality, assuming that if feeling an emotion makes it must real and that one must act on that feeling.

“If I want something, I should have it.”

“My wishing will make it real.”

#### 8. *Personalizing*

Perceiving circumstances and actions of others as targeted toward yourself, perceiving world through the ego-centric filter that everything, or most things, is about yourself. Ego-centric thinking.

#### 9. *Awfulizing — Making things Pervasive*

*Emotionalizing + Labeling = Awfulizing*

Imagining the worst possible scenario and amplifying it with the word "Awful" ("This is awful!") without any clear indication about what *awful* actually refers to. It takes an unpleasant event and spreads it around to other aspects of life, making it pervasive.

#### 10. *Should-ing — Demandingness*

Using the words “should” or “must” to pressure yourself and others to conform to rules. When using “must,” we are “musterbating” (Ellis).

“The tyranny of the shoulds” (Horney)

*emotional determinism.*

*Impairs healthy use of emotions.*

*Limits clear perceptions.*

*Blinds one to seeing world through one’s ego filters.*

*Limits problem-solving skills.*

*Prevents one from working on creative solutions.*

*Misdirects energy to whining and complaining.*

*Limits a sense of choice.*

*Leashes one to a sense of dreadful duty.*

*Eliminates sense of choice.*

facts, activities without making any judgment.

Suspend evaluation; witness what *is*.

*Outcome:* increases choices and options, stops the coloring of things by emotions, obtain cleaner information.

*Objective, observing thinking*

Step back and take second or third perceptual position; What does this look like from neutral observer? Could this be about the source rather than me?

*Outcome:* make things more objective, gain clean information, distinguish self and world.

*Meta-cognitive thinking*

Ask about patterns and structures above and beyond the story and content. Identify thinking patterns. Question words and terms for what they refer to.

*Outcome:* Expand awareness of factors in the back of the mind, see and identify patterns and leverage points of change.

*Choice thinking*

Test “should,” “must,” and “have to.” Why? Who says? What is the rule? What is the demand? Change to “want” or “prefer.”

*Outcome:* prevents addiction and build up of pressure. Keeps wants and desires healthy.

### 11. Filtering

Over-focusing on one facet of something to the exclusive of everything else to create a tunnel vision perspective. Filtering out what's positive and solutions.

*Limits full perspective.  
Blinds one from seeing beyond the tunnel vision.*

### *Perspective / meta-cognitive thinking*

Step back and identify filters that create tunnel vision. Take third-person perspective to empathize with another's view  
*Outcome:* expands awareness to see other perspectives.

### 12. Can't-ing — Taboo-ing; Prohibiting

Imposing semantic limits on oneself and others using the word "can't" which presupposes that there is some law or rule that constrains us from doing something.

*Limits ideas about what's possible.  
Stunts ideas of human potential  
Impairs ability to dream and to take risks.*

### *Possibility thinking*

Test "can'ts." Is physical or psychological "can't?" Ask: What stops you? "Do you have permission? "What would it look, sound or feel like?"  
*Outcome:* Frees from constraints and opens up new possibilities.

### 13. Discounting — Perfectionism, Pessimistic Thinking

The mental attitude of rejecting and/or putting down by dis-qualifying possible solutions, successes, or possibilities (as in, "That doesn't count," "That's nothing. "). "It could have been better."

*Limits small approximates of success and solutions from being recognized and developed.*

### *Appreciative thinking*

Ask: What counts for you? In what way? How can this be valued? For what? What else? Do you have permission to make mistakes?

*Outcome:* Reinforce small steps, enrich sense of value, awaken appreciation.

### 14. Identifying — Identifications

Treating two things as if *the same*. Confusing levels. Using the "to be" verb to create identifications: "He is," "she is," "they are."

*Confuses things, fails to make distinctions, limits self-definition to identifications*

### *E-prime / Process thinking*

Challenge and replace "to be" verbs with verbs that actually describe what a person is doing.  
*Not:* "I am a father" but "I father..."

## Mastering Cognitive Distortions

1. Over-generalizing
  2. All-or-nothing thinking
  3. Labeling
  4. Blaming
  5. Mind-reading
  6. Prophesying
  7. Emotionalizing
  8. Personalizing
  9. Awfulizing
  10. Should-ing
  11. Filtering
  12. Impossibility thinking: Can't-ing
  13. Discounting
  14. Identifying
- Contextual thinking  
Both-and thinking; in-between thinking  
Reality-testing thinking  
Responsibility thinking  
Current sensory information  
Tentative predictive thinking  
Witness thinking or non-emotionalizing  
Objective thinking  
Meta-cognitive thinking  
Choice thinking  
Perspective thinking  
    Possibility thinking  
Appreciative thinking  
E-prime / dis-identifying thinking

## CLEANING UP THE DISTORTIONS

When we are “cognitively wrong” (Maslow) our perceptions are fogging rather than clean. Mental and emotional pain arises not because we are emotionally sick, but because we are cognitively wrong. We are simply operating from a mistaken map. We have maps that simply do not enable us to navigate the territory very well. We have frames that build an unstable structure and foundation. We have not outgrown the childish thinking patterns that distort and leash our potentials. Every cognitive distortion that governs our perceptions creates misery and undermines our pathway to self-actualization. These cognitive distortions are based on deficiency-cognitions, rather than the *Being*-cognitions that inevitably facilitate self-actualization.

### **The Pattern:**

#### ***1) Identify an activity.***

Think of some activity where you are not getting the results that you want.  
What is it? How do you describe it? What is your story?

#### ***2) List and identify cognitive distortions that create difficulties or limitations.***

Use the cognitive distortions as a check-list. What are the 3 big ones for you?  
Have you specified all of the ones that create problems and difficulties for you or another person?  
Which one do you want to work on right now?

#### ***3) Validate and confirm the cognitive distortion.***

Reflect it back to the person.  
"It sounds like you are thinking about this using *Awfulizing*. As you step back from it, does it seem accurate?"  
How else would you characterize this pattern of thought?

#### ***4) Invite the person to a meta-position.***

Does this pattern of thinking reflect one that you typically use or often use?  
How long have you used this cognitive distortion in sorting through things?  
Has it served you well? In what way?  
In what way may it have undermined your sense of well-being and accurate processing?  
What more useful way of processing this information would you like to use?

**5) *Meta-state the distortion to reduce its influence.***

What would you best like to do to reduce its power?

Would you like to challenge, dispute, and argue against Personalizing, Awfulizing, Should-ing, etc.?

Are you ready to identify and release these cognitive patterns?

What else will bring these patterns into the light where you can deal with them?

What else will break their power of working outside of consciousness?

[Journaling, appointing someone as a detector, etc.]

**6) *Update the cognitive distortions with empowering thinking patterns.***

As you use the check list of the more enhancing ways of thinking, which one will you use to replace the misery-producing thinking pattern?

