

COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY PRACTITIONER COURSE



COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

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Most of the thoughts that automatically pop into our minds are distorted in some way; they may be unrealistically negative or selective to a fault, ultimately leaving out important information. These cognitive distortions typically result in a negative change in mood and lowered self-esteem. These thoughts occur so frequently that it is easy not to notice them at all, but what we do notice is a sudden feeling of sadness, anxiety, or anger. The challenge is learning how to identify these common cognitive distortions, how to challenge them and ultimately place them with more helpful, realistic thoughts. Can you remember a recent event which caused an automatic thought to pop into your head (for example, 'not good enough' or 'stupid'?)

DELETIONS

You most likely agree on the fact that it is very easy to remember our credits and even easier to forget about debts. Our minds are very good at avoiding the useless pains that are caused by uneasy thought. However, deletions happen for different reasons - when it is necessary to concentrate our energy on a particular task, we delete every extra perception to help us focus on what we consider most crucial. Even during non-critical moments of our lives, we delete about 80% of the data that reaches our brain.

Close your eyes for a moment and listen to the noise your neighbours are making as they enter their apartment, to the sound of the traffic on the main road, and also... to your heartbeat, to the air entering your nose, now...open your eyes and take a few moments to observe all the details of the room around you. As you've most likely noticed, we have to ignore many details in order not to be overwhelmed by an excess of information.

When an individual is anxious, they commonly develop 'tunnel vision' where they focus solely on the negative aspects of situations and delete any positive aspects. Sometimes the whole picture can be coloured by a single negative detail. For example: Focusing on the one person who doesn't like you rather than the other twenty who do.

MENTAL FILTER

A mental filter is when we are presented with a collection of ideas or experiences in close concession, and our minds filter all these experiences together through one funnel to come up with one conclusion. This cognitive distortion plays part largely when it comes to negative experiences, which magnify the negative aspects of past experience and then ultimately trigger an automatic response for future events.

BLACK OR WHITE THINKING / POLARISED THINKING

Black-or-white thinking is extreme thinking that often leads to intense emotions and behaviours. When things are either 'black-or-white.' We're either perfect, or we're a complete failure — and there's no middle ground. When we place people or situations in 'either/or' categories, where there are no shades of grey. This doesn't allow for the complexity of most individuals and situations.

Unfortunately, we fall into all-or-nothing traps very quickly: Can you relate to the following - you start your new 'healthy eating' diet to lose weight, and you give in to the temptation of chocolate. Black or white thinking might lead you to conclude that you have failed your plan and then proceed to eat the entire box of chocolates.



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Black-and-white thinking does not acknowledge that there are usually several shades of grey that exist between black and white. In seeing only two possible sides or outcomes to something, a person ignores the middle — which is most often the more reasonable — ground.

GENERALISING & CATEGORISING

Based on one instance in the past or present, you assume that in the future all others will follow a similar pattern. A sense of helplessness often accompanies such overgeneralizations. For example: Just because one ex-partner cheated on you, you believe that 'ALL MEN (or Women) ARE BAD!' Or you have one of those days when you get into your car and it doesn't work, you drop a slice of pizza cheese side down and think to yourself, 'this kind of thing is always happening to me. Nothing ever goes right for me', and then feel even worse. You get easily angered. Perhaps when taking public transport you are delayed by another passenger who cannot find the money to pay for her bus ticket and think to yourself, 'this is typical; other people are so stupid,' and you become tense and angry.

Put things into perspective. How true is it that 'nothing ever goes right for you?' Consider how many other people in the world might also be having car trouble at this exact moment? Do you ever judge others? When you judge all people as 'stupid,' including the women buying her ticket on the bus, you make yourself angrier and are less able to effectively deal with relatively minor mishaps.

JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

A person who 'jumps to conclusions' will often make a negative interpretation or prediction even when there is no real evidence supporting their conclusion. This sort of thinking is often based on what we think other people feel towards us. It can show up as 'mind reading' (assuming the thoughts and intentions of others) or also as 'fortune-telling' (anticipating the worse and accepting it as fact). For example, you're at a party, and you don't like your outfit. You decide 'everybody is laughing at me' (mind reading), or say you're going to take your drivers test and 'know' that you are going to fail (fortune-telling).

For another example, imagine you pass your neighbour on the street and she says a quick 'hi' but doesn't look very pleased to see you or act in a friendly way. You assume that she must be annoyed with you about your dog barking and is making plans to report you to the landlord. However, you'll never know for sure what she was thinking, so you make the wise decision to challenge your negative assumptions. To do this, take a step back and consider all the evidence you have available to you. Do you have enough information or evidence to conclude that everyone was laughing at you at that party or that your neighbour is annoyed with you? Is it possible that she was just pre-occupied with her own thoughts that day?

MAGNIFICATION (CATASTROPHISING)

Magnification is taking a fairly minor negative event and blowing it completely out of proportion — imagining all sorts of disasters resulting from the one small event.

For example, your new girlfriend declines an invitation to have dinner with your parents. Before giving her a chance to explain her reasons, you hang up on her and conclude that this is her way of telling you the relationship is over. But it doesn't end there; then you go on to imagine her ringing each of her friends and telling them what a mistake she made in dating you. You decide you're never going to find another partner and will die old and lonely.



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You can nip catastrophic thinking in the bud by acknowledging it for what it is – it's simply just 'thoughts.' If you find yourself thinking about the worst case scenario, consider the following: Take your objective stance and put things in perspective. Are you sure that your girlfriend wanted to end the relationship or is it possible she had other valid reasons for not agreeing to dinner with your parents? Consider less terrifying explanations. What other possible reasons could there be for her saying 'no'?

Weigh up the evidence that you have (the facts). Do you have enough information to reach the conclusion that she wants to leave you? Has she given you a reason to think this before? Look for any evidence that counteracts the assumption that you've made. Focus on what you could do to cope with the situation and the people or resources that can help you. No matter what catastrophic assumption you've reached in your mind, it's unlikely that the world is going to end even if your assumption does come to fruition. And in which case, if the worst case scenario did happen - you're most likely capable of surviving and growing stronger as an individual through it all - human beings can be very resilient.

PERSONALISATION

When you believe that everything others say or do is some sort of direct, personal reaction to you. Also, when you compare yourself to other people and try to determine who is smarter, better looking, etc. If you think in this way, you may see yourself as responsible for some unhealthy external event that you were not actually responsible for at all. For example, we were late for dinner and caused the host to overcook the meal. If I had just pushed my husband to leave earlier, this wouldn't have happened.'

SELF-VICTIMIZATION (LEARNED HELPLESSNESS)

We've all known someone who regularly feels sorry for themselves. Heck, even we fall victim of this mindset once in a while. Self-victimization is when a person reflects on their past trauma, experiences and circumstances (or even their present) and overindulges themselves in self-pity and sympathy. They become so immersed in their negative thoughts and experiences that they begin to live in them permanently. What we focus on in life, we feel. Emotions aren't illnesses: they're the results of particular thoughts, and thoughts don't need curing - they need managing and changing. People with learned helplessness believe they cannot change or that they should be treated a certain way and handled a certain way because they learned from their experiences, peers and family that they are a victim.

THE FALLACY OF FAIRNESS

This is when people become consumed with the concept that certain things in life 'aren't fair': it's not fair they weren't born into a rich family, it's not fair they're not taller, it's not fair that other person got a promotion and not them, it's not fair that they have depression whilst other people have happy lives, etc. This attitude translates, quite plainly, into someone saying 'the world is not giving me what I want when I want it in the way that I want it when it should be'. Life is never fair: everyone has their moments of struggle, some more than others. There are good people who suffer their whole lives whilst there are bad people who never suffer at all. However, fairness is nothing more about perception and comparison: it's how we view the world rather than the way the world is.



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BLAMING AND IRRESPONSIBILITY

People find it relieving and liberating to blame other people for the way their life is the way it is: it's X's fault they have self-esteem issues, it's Y's fault they feel depressed, it's Z's fault things didn't go to plan. Whilst it may be satisfying to place blame, blaming others doesn't alleviate or solve the problems you're dealing with: only you can fix how you feel about a situation, and only you can get yourself through a situation. When we take more responsibility for the role we play in our own lives (for our actions, thoughts, behaviours, beliefs), the more empowered we are to change.

HEAVEN'S REWARD FALLACY

This is where people live in a world of idealism in which they believe martyrdom is a worthy role to play in life. Serving the greater good can be often time be a distortion in our minds of a justification for doing things we want to do and endorsing things we want to believe in. No one is serving the greater good in these scenarios: they're just using the greater good as an excuse and justification for their actions and behaviours.

CONFUSING FEELINGS WITH FACTS

Some people can become so distorted in their thinking that they end up defining themselves by how they feel: if they define themselves as depressed, they'll act depressed and if they define themselves as anxious, they'll act on edge and anxious. Note, self-defining is different from expressing to someone you're feeling on a certain day or through a certain period of time. Feelings are not facts: no one should ever feel the need to define themselves to emotion because they are so much more than that emotion. The danger of defining oneself by an emotion such as depression, we're psychologically more inclined to feel secure and comfortable being that way (as we assign our self-esteem and identity to it), meaning it's much harder to help someone out of this emotion and through recovery, as they'll feel like they are losing a part of themselves.

MISTAKING BELIEFS FOR WHAT'S TRUE

Just because someone believes in something doesn't always mean it's true. Whilst there are some examples of grounded, scientific evidence supporting many things which were once theories (i.e. beliefs such as evolution), most beliefs are nothing more than beliefs. However, because people put so much personal identity into their beliefs, they distort their beliefs into facts and feel challenged and personally offended by those who challenge or disprove them. Just because you believe something is wrong doesn't mean it is, just because you believe in a God doesn't mean there is one and just because you don't believe in a god doesn't mean there isn't one. People, unfortunately, justify many actions with their beliefs: their beliefs permit them to be prejudiced against groups of people, behave certain ways and do certain things.

LABELLING

When we 'label' ourselves based on our behaviour in specific situations. We define ourselves by one specific behaviour (usually a negative behaviour) and fail to consider other positive characteristics and actions. For example: 'I'm always anxious' even though this is not always the case, or 'I'm not good enough' because you failed at something, even though there are many other things that you're good at.



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Or say, for example, you read a worrying article in the newspaper about a rise in crime throughout the city in which you live. The article reinforces your belief that you live in a completely dangerous city, which exacerbates your feeling of anxiety about going out.

MYSTICAL GUESSWORK

We are only ever one thought and decision away from transforming everything about how you're experiencing life. However, we are most times our greatest enemy by telling ourselves through mystical guesswork that we won't be good enough, that we can't do something, that we won't like something, that we'll end up feeling this way if we do X, etc. We can't mystically guess our futures and how we (or other people and situations) will be or feel in the future.

RIGID RULE KEEPING

When you have a list of rules about how you and other people should behave. Those who break the rules make us angry, and if you break the rules, you feel guilty as a result. People often believe they are trying to motivate themselves with shoulds and shouldn't, almost as if they must be punished before they can do anything, for example: "I must...I should...You must... You should...". Such statements provide insight into the standards you tend to uphold and the things you expect of others and yourself. These standards can at times be helpful. However, they can also create unrealistic expectations that you or other people will find it difficult to live up to.

The inflexibility of the demands that you place on yourself, others, and the world around you, often means you do not adapt to reality as well as you could. You believe that you 'must' have the approval of your friends and associates. This causes you to feel anxious in various social situations and drives you to try and gain everyone's approval.

You think that as you try very hard to be considerate and kind, in return they really should be just as kind and considerate. However, because your demand is unrealistic – sadly, other people are governed by their own priorities, and you often feel let down by others who don't act in the same way in which you do. You believe that you absolutely 'should' never let others down. This means that you rarely put your own needs first. In many areas of life, you don't assert yourself, and end up taking on more than your fair share. You end up stressed as a result.

Adopting flexible preferences about yourself, others, and the world, in general, is a healthy alternative to inflexible and rigid rule keeping. Rather than making demands on yourself and others, instead, pay attention to language. Replace words like 'must,' 'should' and 'need,' with 'prefer,' 'want' and 'wish.' Limit approval seeking. Would you have a satisfying life even if you didn't get the approval of everyone you're seeking it from?

EMOTIONAL REASONING

Often if we depend heavily on our feelings as a guide, this leads us away from the path of reality. For example, your husband has been spending a lot of evenings working late at his office with a colleague. You feel suspicious and jealous. Based on your feelings, you reach the conclusion that your partner is having an affair with his co-worker.

Start paying attention to your thoughts. Watch out for thoughts like 'I'm feeling apprehensive, something must be wrong' and recognise that feelings are often not the best way to



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measure reality, especially if you're not in the best emotional state at the moment. Consider how you would view the situation if you were feeling calmer. Check to see if there is any concrete evidence that supports your interpretation of your feelings. Is there really any evidence that suggests something bad is about to happen?

MINIMALISATION

In the opposite way to magnification, which is taking a fairly minor negative event and blowing it completely out of proportion, minimizing is when we play down our own positive attributes. A person who assigns multiple negative labels to themselves tends to promote these definitions before anything positive. Minimisation makes us susceptible to being abused, mistreated and taken advantage of as these behaviours against us correlate with how we define and describe ourselves. We devalue ourselves proportionately to how we pedestal and idolise others to the detriment of our self-esteem and confidence, all in the pursuit of humility.

It's easy for many people who have never suffered from low self-esteem to regard those who inappropriately shrink the magnitude of their self-worth with detrimental self-talk as attention seeking or fishing for compliments; but it is the job of a life coach to be able to identify the difference between those seeking compliments vs. those who truly believe what they are saying. To a conscientious, empathetic and congruent person, low self-esteem can be seen as clear as the light of day; the challenge therefore as a life coach is to give the client the permission to keep employing the same minimising and magnifying techniques, but reverse the application, and to not feel guilty, arrogant or ashamed of doing so.

Our perception of reality is rarely reality, and cognitive distortions occur when the brain creates faulty connections and, effectively, lies to you. Everyone who reads psychology will be familiar with the phrase, "correlation does not equal causation", and this is where such a statement applies. It's commonplace to make connections where there is none when interpreting life as most people assume that because two variables are correlated, one causes leads to the other.

Cognitive distortions are irrational thoughts and beliefs we unconsciously reinforce over time through mental, or oral, repetition, and are effective at provoking or exacerbating symptoms of depression if propagated over a long period of time. Minimisation is a defence mechanism employed to help the individual through adversity, but its power to generate distorted thinking causes more damage in the long term. Starting a daily journal in which you take note of only the positive experiences you've had in your day (no matter how minor they are), practising gratitude, and focussing on building a foundation for self-worth and internal validation will allow you to cease minimalising your worth and self. Whereas taking a step back from reality, practising objective questioning and emotional responsibility allows for an empowered and measured reaction to maximisation.

DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

Disqualifying the positive is about processing information in a biased way. Disqualifying the positive is a mental process that changes a positive event into a neutral or negative event in your mind. For example, you believe that you're worthless and when you find out you've got a promotion at work you tell yourself 'it doesn't count because anyone could get this sort of thing.' Instead of feeling pleased with yourself, you feel quite disappointed.



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QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION:

1. How many of these cognitive distortions can you recognise inside of your own thinking?

Unhelpful Thought	Category

2. Can you identify one of these cognitive distortions that might be damaging inside of the context of your current personal relationships?

Situation	Feelings	Thoughts

3. Can you identify one of these cognitive distortions that might be damaging inside of the context of your current professional relationships?

Situation	Feelings	Thoughts



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4. How could you become more effective at recognising your own destructive thinking patterns and those of your clients going forward?

CHALLENGING UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

Unhelpful Thought:

Challenges:

Is there any evidence that contradicts this thought?

Can I identify patterns of unhelpful thinking?

What are the costs of thinking this way?

What are the benefits of thinking this way?

How will I think about this in 6 months time?

Is there another way of looking at this situation?

Balanced Thought:



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YOUR COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS EXERCISE

This exercise challenges you to look deep. Take the time to reflect on events which have happened in your life and consider if there were any cognitive distortions involved and their connection and relation to your limiting beliefs and subsequent emotional consequences.

Can you identify which part of your thought process caused the emotions you felt? What limiting beliefs underlay the distortion? Write down five negative and five positive life events to analyse and dissect them as much as possible.

Positive Life Event	Negative Life Event	Limiting Belief (Cognitive Distortion)	Emotional Consequence

