

# COMMON THINKING ERRORS

AKA COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS »

A thinking error is exactly what it sounds like—an error in one’s thinking. Similar to how a computer program might not work properly if the wrong information is processed, so too our behaviors will be negatively influenced if we process bad, or negative, thoughts. There’s hardly any question that our thoughts influence the decisions we make. Therefore, it’s healthy to examine the way we think and why we think the way we do. Consider the following list. Check the ones that you have committed.

## ALL OR NOTHING // BLACK AND WHITE ☐

In polarized thinking, things are either “black-or-white.” We have to be perfect or we’re a failure — there is no middle ground. You place people or situations in “either/or” categories, with no shades of gray or allowing for the complexity of most people and situations. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.

## FILTERING ☐

We take the negative details and magnify them while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation. For instance, a person may pick out a single, unpleasant detail and dwell on it exclusively so that their vision of reality becomes darkened or distorted.

## CATASTROPHIZING ☐

We expect disaster to strike, no matter what. This is also referred to as “magnifying” or “minimizing.” We hear about a problem and use “what if” questions (e.g., “What if tragedy strikes?” “What if it happens to me?”). For example, a person might exaggerate the importance of insignificant events (such as their mistake, or someone else’s achievement) or they may inappropriately shrink the magnitude of significant events until they appear tiny (for example, a person’s own desirable qualities or someone else’s imperfections).

## OVERGENERALIZATIONS ☐

In this cognitive distortion, we come to a general conclusion based on a single incident or a single piece of evidence. If something bad happens only once, we expect it to happen over and over again. A person may see a single, unpleasant event as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat.

## **MIND READING** □

You believe you know (you assume) what others' motivations are, or what they are thinking, failing to consider other, more likely possibilities. Example: "He's thinking that I don't know the first thing about this project."

## **JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS** □

Without individuals saying so, we think we know what they are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, we are able to determine how people are feeling toward us. For example, a person may conclude that someone is reacting negatively toward them but doesn't actually bother to find out if they are correct. Another example is how a person may anticipate that things will turn out badly and will feel convinced that his or her prediction is already an established fact.

## **PERSONALIZATION** □

Personalization is a distortion where a person believes that everything others do or say is some kind of direct, personal reaction to the person. We also compare ourselves to others trying to determine who is smarter, better looking, and so on. A person engaging in personalization may also see themselves as the cause of some unhealthy external event that they were not responsible for. For example, "We were late to the dinner party and caused the hostess to overcook the meal. If I had only pushed my husband to leave on time, this wouldn't have happened."

## **CONTROL MISCONCEPTIONS** □

If we feel externally controlled; we see ourselves as helpless a victim of fate. For example, "I can't help it if the quality of the work is poor because my boss demanded I work overtime on it." The fallacy of internal control has us assuming responsibility for the pain and happiness of everyone around us. For example, "Why aren't you happy? Is it because of something I did?"

## **MISCONCEPTION OF FAIRNESS** □

We feel resentful because we think we know what is fair, but other people won't agree with us. As our parents tell us, "Life isn't always fair," and people who go through life applying a measuring ruler against every situation judging its "fairness" will often feel badly and negative because of it.

## **BLAMING** □

We hold other people responsible for our pain or take the other track and blame ourselves for every problem. For example, "Stop making me feel bad about myself!" Nobody can "make" us feel any particular way—only we have control over our own emotions and emotional reactions.

## **SHOULD AND MUSTS** □

We have a list of ironclad rules about how people should behave. People who break the rules make us angry, and we feel guilty when we violate these rules. A person may often believe they are trying to motivate themselves with “should” and “shouldn’ts,” as if they have to be punished before they can do anything. For example, “I really should exercise. I shouldn’t be so lazy.” Musts and oughts are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When a person directs should-statements toward others, they often feel anger, frustration and resentment.

## **EMOTIONAL REASONING** □

We believe that what we feel must be true automatically. If we feel stupid and boring, then we must be stupid and boring. You assume that your unhealthy emotions reflect the way things really are—“I feel it, therefore it must be true.”

## **MISCONCEPTION OF CHANGE** □

We expect that other people will change to suit us if we just pressure or persuade them enough. We need to change people because our hopes for happiness seem to depend entirely on them.

## **LABELING** □

We generalize one or two qualities into a negative global judgment. These are extreme forms of generalizing, and are also referred to as “labeling” and “mislabeling.” Instead of describing an error in context of a specific situation, a person will attach an unhealthy label to themselves. For example, they may say, “I’m a loser” in a situation where they failed at a specific task. When someone else’s behavior rubs a person the wrong way, they may attach an unhealthy label to him, such as “He’s a real jerk.” Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded. For example, instead of saying someone drops her children off at daycare every day, a person who is mislabeling might say that “she abandons her children to strangers.”

## **ALWAYS BEING RIGHT** □

We are continually on trial to prove that our opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and we will go to any length to demonstrate our rightness. For example, “I don’t care how badly arguing with me makes you feel, I’m going to win this argument no matter what because I’m right.” Being right often is more important than the feelings of others around a person who engages in this cognitive distortion, even loved ones.

Sources ::

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