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4 December 2022

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The Sixteen Most Common Cognitive Distortions

What's a 'cognitive distortion' and why do so many people have them? Cognitive distortions are ways that our thought patterns can convince us that something is true or false. These are typically thoughts that occur automatically, and are usually used to reinforce negative thinking or emotions. Our automatic thoughts can feel rational and accurate, and most of all, they can feel *factual*. But with examination, we can often find evidence that our thoughts are NOT factual, but based on a set of negative thought patterns that have developed based on our feelings, rather than factual evidence.

Cognitive distortions are at the core of what many cognitive-behavioral therapists and other kinds of health professionals try and help a person learn to change. By learning to correctly identify distorted thoughts, a person can then respond to the distorted thoughts by balancing them with thoughts that are more balanced, and based on fact/reality rather than negative feelings. By refuting negative thoughts over and over again, they will slowly diminish overtime and be automatically replaced by more rational, balanced thinking.

1. 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.

3. Overgeneralization.

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

4. Jumping to Conclusions/Fortune Telling.

Without individuals saying so, 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 and don't actually bother to find out if they are correct. Another example is a person may anticipate that things will turn out badly, and will feel convinced that their prediction is already an established fact.

5. 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).

6. Personalization.

Thinking that everything people do or say is some kind of reaction to us. We also compare ourselves to others trying to determine who is smarter, better looking, etc. A person sees themselves as the cause of some negative external event that they were in fact, 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."

7. Control Fallacies.

If we feel externally controlled, we see ourselves as a helpless victim of fate. For example, "I can't help it if the quality of the work is poor, 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?"

8. Fallacy of Fairness.

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

9. 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.

10. Shoulds:

We have a list of ironclad rules about how others and we 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 shoulds 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, which does not propel us to change, but only serves to make us feel badly.

11. 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."

12. Fallacy of Change.

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

13. Global 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.”

14. 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.

15. Heaven’s Reward Fallacy.

We expect our sacrifice and self-denial to pay off, as if someone is keeping score. We feel bitter when the reward doesn’t come.

16. Musterbating.

Many of us believe that we, “MUST,” achieve at the top, and MUST do or perform certain things in order to feel successful and comparable to others within the many settings of our social community. We find it hard to say no and take on more than we can do. When we fall short of perfect or completing a task or project we condemn and criticize ourselves. The reality is that we DO NOT HAVE TO DO ANYTHING WE DON’T WANT TO DO. WE CAN AND HAVE THE POWER TO SAY, “No.”

Which of these sixteen cognitive distortions have you seen in yourself as you read through them? What can be done to challenge them and change towards a more healthy cognition and more realistic perception of reality?

The Probability of a catastrophic event happening is what tempers the possibility of that catastrophic event in belief and decision making. So, It is possible that Aliens could land in my front yard and ruin a birthday party by zapping everyone but the probability of that happening is near to never - so why consider that as a reason to not go to or have a birthday party? It is certainly possible that an asteroid will strike the earth and vaporize the parade down town but the likelihood (probability) of that is extremely low and nearer to never than to more likely. It is possible that while accepting a reward at a convention that you will mess up everything with a single simple stumble on the way up to the stage but the probability of that level of catastrophe, or even stumbling, is very low and gets near to impossible and when you add stumble with knocking all the tables in the room over and soiling everyone's clothes it becomes even more unlikely.

Everything is possible because possibility reigns in the land of human imagination but very little of what is possible is probable to any significant level or ratio in the realm of reality. In other words, in our minds anything can happen but in the world very few of that is likely to ever manifest. Yet, when we catastrophize, we assume the possible and filter out the probability of it. Panic soon sets in as the imagined and improbable becomes the perceived most likely and imminent. We reduce, if not eliminate, our anxiety, panic episodes, and depression (hopelessness and helplessness) by challenging the possible with probability.

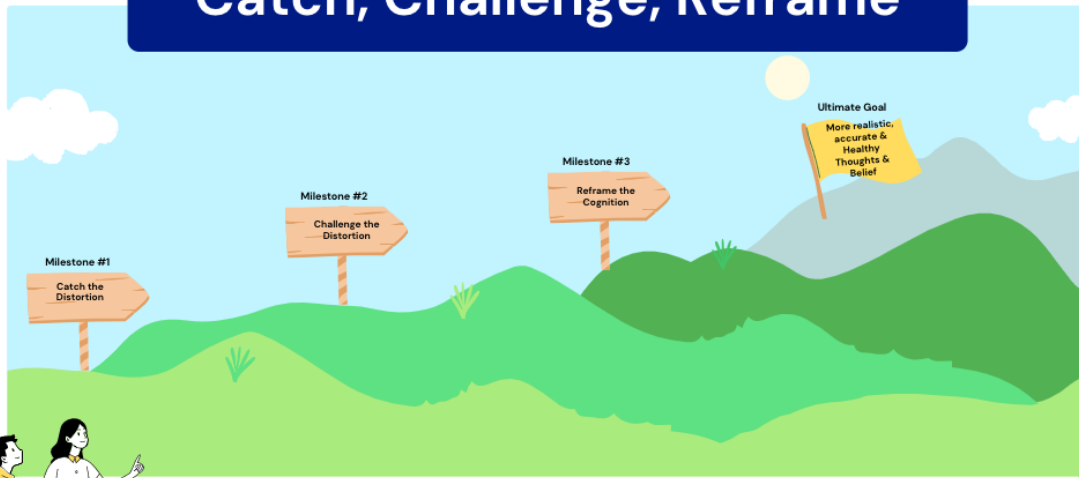
COGNITIVE REFRAMING.

The second step in the process is to reframe the thought, perception, or expectation to a more realistic and more probable thought, perception, or expectancy. We have already challenged our catastrophic cognition that distorted our perception of reality and hindered our social functioning and determined the thought to be unlikely and unrealistic. So, now what?

Now, we reframe it to be more realistic, more likely, and more healthy for us. The catastrophizing distortion of flubbing up everything while walking to a stage at a dinner to receive a reward is dismissed and we replace that with the more likely undistorted cognition, belief, and perception by realizing two things in dissecting the original distortion - Stumbling while walking and after stumbling knocking down all of the tables and making a total destructive mess of everything. First, it is possible and there is some level of probability that one may stumble while walking - even walking while people are watching. This does happen with frequency for many people. So, it might happen. Again, though, many people do it and even in that event you may see others stumble while walking up to the stage. Many, recover fast and well and most people in the audience understand it is no big deal. So, if one stumbles one moves on as gracefully as possible smiles about it while others smile with us and nothing happens.

A major trip and fall, on the other hand, is very much unlikely and shouldn't be thought. It rarely happens. Now, let's add that improbable full trip and fall, to the also improbable knocking down everything and destroying the happiness of the evening - VERY IMPROBABLE. Why? Because when events are being set up, walkways for people to make their way up to the stage are carefully measured and calculated to prevent such a thing from happening - also true for ensuring obstacles and trip hazards are out of the way. Thus, it isn't likely at all that a stumble will occur, much more a fall trip and knock down of tables that are several feet away from each other and the path the walker takes.

Catch, Challenge, Reframe



1

When the negative auto-cognition manifests itself we catch it. Not unlike catching a fish in a net. We grab it and own it.



2

Now that we have caught the distorted view or belief we examine it for accuracy, realism, and truthfulness.

Is what I just thought true about me?

Possibility v. Probability



3

What is possible and likely?
What's more accurate here?
What's true about me/others/situations?

LIST THEM

