

PATTERNS OF COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS, adapted from David Burns

These are 10 common cognitive distortions that can contribute to negative emotions. They also fuel catastrophic thinking patterns that are particularly disabling. Read these and see if you can identify ones that are familiar to you.

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.

The advantage of this is that it is more predictable and creates the feeling there is order in the world around you. This, in turn, should give you an edge to controlling your world.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. Uncertainty is all we have. Living comfortably with uncertainty is possible, but it takes time to master. The skills you are about to learn will help.

2. Over generalization: You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. If you wake up in more pain you may think, "I'll never be able to enjoy anything any more." Misery does love company, but globalizing misfortune in this way creates an exaggerated sense of rejection and loneliness.

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. For example, you are preparing lunch for some friends and discover that you do not have an essential ingredient to make a dish that you were planning to include. All you can think about is how the whole lunch will be ruined. It gives you indigestion.

4. Disqualifying the Positive: You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or other. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences. For instance, a friend comes over and tells you that you look great. Your immediate thought is: "I don't feel great. She doesn't understand." Maybe not, but try a simple "thank you."

5. Jumping to Conclusions: You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusions.

A. Mind Reading: You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don't bother to check this out. For example, you pass a coworker in the hallway and say "Hi" and he doesn't respond. You think, he must be upset with me, what did I do wrong? When you check it out, you find that the coworker was preoccupied about a sick child he had just left at home.

B. The Fortune Teller Error: You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an established fact. For example, you wake up with a headache and think "Now my whole day is ruined. I had so much to do and I'll never get it all done."

6. Magnification (catastrophizing) or Minimization: You exaggerate the importance of things, or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other fellow's imperfections). If you find yourself experiencing a flare-up in your pain and find yourself saying "I can't stand this, I can't take this any more!" As a matter of fact, however, you can, though you may not want to. In minimization, however, you take positive qualities or events and deny them their importance. For instance, someone comments on how nice it is to see you at an

outing and you say, “Lot of good it does if I can’t participate in the activities.”

7. Emotional Reasoning: You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true". For example you think “I feel useless, therefore I am useless.”

8. Labeling and Mislabeled: This is an extreme form of over generalization. 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 them. "He's a xyz louse". Instead of seeing yourself as an individual who has a pain problem, you find yourself saying, “I'm defective, broken, and without any redeemable qualities.”

9. Personalization: You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event, which in fact you were not primarily responsible for. For example you and your spouse go out to eat at a fancy restaurant, but the food and the service are poor. You find yourself feeling responsible for making a bad choice and “ruining” your evening together.

10. Should Statements: You try to motivate yourself with should and shouldn't, 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, and these statements set you up for feeling resentful and pressured. They also imply that you are complying with an external authority. When you direct should statements toward others you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.

Old “Tapes”

The irrational beliefs and cognitive distortions described above are old “tapes” that we play from our early experience as children. They reflect the observed responses of our families, our teachers, and the society in which we develop. Loretta Laroche, a comedienne who teaches these principles through humor, conjures up the image of a big yellow school bus that each person drives through life. Various people get on and off, but some have a lifetime ticket. They may include parents, teachers, ex-lovers, friends, and mentors, both alive and dead. There’s always someone who thinks he or she knows the best way of getting where you’re going, and sometimes that person will be found in the driver’s seat. But this is your opportunity to decide who’s really driving your bus. To return to the “tapes” metaphor, it’s your opportunity to edit your old tapes and make some new ones.

There are different kinds of tapes, with different recurring themes. For example, you either assume all of the responsibility or none of it (“The pain is all my fault” or “The pain is all your fault). Or you expect a consistency in the world that doesn’t exist (“If I’m good, bad things won’t happen to me”). Or perhaps you feel that if you think negatively it will ward off bad fortune (“I’m feeling better this morning, but if I tell anyone the pain might get worse”). Thinking in restricted, unconscious patterns (the old tapes) often robs you of the flexibility needed to cope with the ever-changing world and your physical problems.