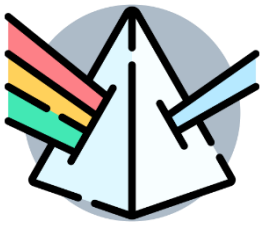
Unhelpful Thinking Styles/Cognitive Distortions

Unhelpful thinking styles (cognitive distortions) can make things feel worse than they are, impacting how we see ourselves, others, and life in general. These thoughts can be automatic and hard to spot but noticing them is the first step to change. In doing so, we can start to challenge them and begin looking at things in a more balanced way. This helps improve how we think and feel, and how we cope with life's challenges.

The text in blue helps us to consider alternative, more helpful thoughts.

Mental filter



Only noticing what our filter allows, ignoring evidence which doesn't fit our beliefs. Focusing on negatives while disregarding the positives.

Am I only noticing the bad? Is there anything positive that I am overlooking? What's the full picture here? What went well?

All-or-nothing thinking

Believing something is either wholly good, or wholly bad / right or wrong / success or failure. This can make setbacks feel the end of the world.

Things are rarely all good or all bad. What might be in between? Not everything is perfect. Am I setting impossible standards?

Overgeneralisation

Drawing a conclusion based on a single event or small number of experiences. E.g. 'I will never get a job' after an unsuccessful interview.

Replace 'always' or 'never' with 'sometimes' or 'often'. Can I think of times this didn't happen? One setback doesn't define me.

Emotional reasoning

Believing something is true because we feel it intensely. E.g. I feel anxious, I must be in danger / I feel lonely, so nobody cares about me.

It's okay to feel this way, but am I basing this on facts, or how I feel? What would I think if I was feeling calm or neutral?

Mind reading & fortune telling

Jumping to conclusions based on assumptions about what *we* think other people or thinking, or what we think might happen in the future.

Am I assuming I know what others are thinking/predicting the future? What's the evidence/how likely is it to happen?

Magnification & minimisation

Exaggerating negative parts of ourselves/others/situations while downplaying positives often making problems bigger than they are.

Is it as bad as it feels or am I magnifying? Am I seeing this fairly? What would a friend say to me/or what would I say to them?

Catastrophising

Always thinking of the worst outcome or believing that the worst thing is likely to happen to us. This can make minor issues feel overwhelming.

This might feel big right now, but it's probably manageable. What's the most likely outcome rather than the worst one?

Personalisation

Relating external events to ourselves or taking ownership for things which are outwith our control, often blaming ourselves unnecessarily.

Feeling responsible doesn't mean I am. What is within my control vs. what is not? Not everything is about me and that's okay!

Labelling

Extreme overgeneralisation where we assign labels based on one action or trait (normally ourselves), e.g. 'I'm a failure' after a set-back.

Nobody is defined by a single action or event. What else is true about me? What would I say to a friend in the same situation?

'Shoulds' and 'musts'

Strict rules like 'they should so this' or 'I must do that' can lead to feelings of frustration towards others or shame and guilt towards ourselves.

Why must things be this way? Instead of 'should' and 'must', try 'could' or 'I would like it if'. Am I frustrated due to my expectations?

Adapted from Beck (1963, 1979); Burns (1980); Ellis (1997); Gilbert (1998)

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