

Identifying unhelpful thought patterns

Unhelpful thought patterns known as cognitive distortions are habitual, inaccurate ways of thinking that make situations seem worse than they are. They are not signs of weakness or lack of intelligence; everyone experiences them, especially under stress. The trouble is that distorted thoughts feel completely true in the moment, and that false sense of accuracy fuels anxiety, low mood, anger, and shame.

Common cognitive distortions	Alternative ways of thinking
All-or-nothing thinking Believing everything is either good or bad, with nothing in between.	Look for the middle ground: • Are there more than two options here? • How else can I think about the situation?
Filtering Focusing on the negatives and ignoring the positives.	Consider the whole picture: • Am I looking at the negatives and ignoring the positives? • How else could this play out?
Personalizing Unfairly blaming yourself for anything that goes wrong.	Look at all possibilities: • Is this really about me? • What other explanation might there be for this situation?
Mind reading Assuming you know what others are thinking.	Question your assumptions: • How do I know what others are thinking? • What is the evidence?
Catastrophizing Imagining that potential negative consequences will be disastrous.	Seek a more realistic perspective: • What is the evidence that this will occur? • Will this matter in one month's time?
Overgeneralizing Reaching a conclusion about one event and then applying it to everything.	Be specific: • Is it true that this is always the case? • What are the facts? What are my interpretations?
Emotional reasoning Believing something is true because you feel it is true.	Look for evidence of this belief: • Am I confusing my feelings with the facts? • Are my perceptions correct?
Labelling Reducing yourself or others to a single characteristic	Shift judgement to curiosity: • What other qualities do I have? • What might be causing their actions?
"Should" statements Thinking in terms of what "should" happen. This is often based on "rules" learned in the family.	Rewrite your "rules": • Change "should" to "could" and consider more useful alternatives.

What to do once you spot one

Recognizing a distortion is only the first move. The next is to challenge the thought: weigh the real evidence, consider other explanations, and form a more balanced view you can actually believe. A thought record walks you through that process step by step.