

## **COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING**

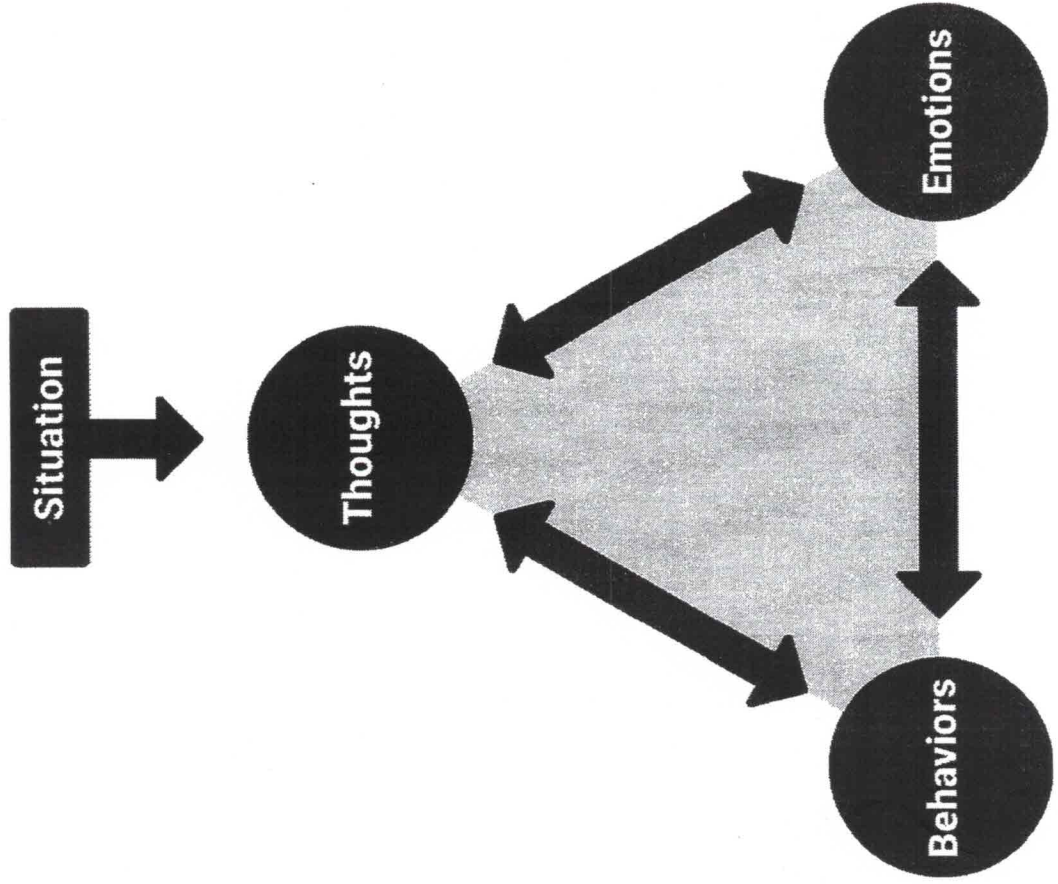
### **I. Identifying Irrational Thoughts/Cognitive Distortion**

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# The Cognitive Triangle

The **cognitive triangle** shows how thoughts, emotions, and behaviors affect one another. This means changing your *thoughts* will change how you *feel* and *behave*.



A **situation** is anything that happens in your life, which triggers the cognitive triangle.

**Thoughts** are your interpretations of a situation. For example, if a stranger looks at you with an angry expression, you could think: "Oh no, what did I do wrong?" or "Maybe they are having a bad day."

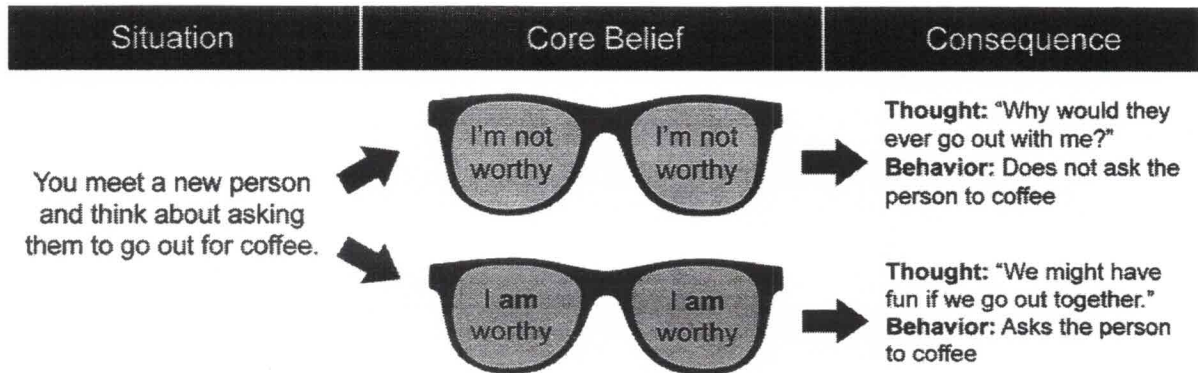
**Emotions** are feelings, such as happy, sad, angry, or worried. Emotions can have physical components as well as mental, such as low energy when feeling sad, or a stomachache when nervous.

**Behaviors** are your response to a situation. Behaviors include actions such as saying something or doing something (or, choosing not to do something).

# Core Beliefs

Everyone looks at the world differently. Two people can have the same experience, yet have very different interpretations of what happened. **Core beliefs** are the deeply held beliefs that influence how we interpret our experiences.

Think of core beliefs like a pair of sunglasses. Everyone has a different “shade” that causes them to see things differently.



Many people have negative core beliefs that cause harmful consequences. To begin challenging your negative core beliefs, you first need to identify what they are. Here are some common examples:

I'm unlovable	I'm stupid	I'm boring
I'm not good enough	I'm ugly	I'm worthless
I'm a bad person	I'm abnormal	I'm undeserving

What is one of your negative core beliefs? \_\_\_\_\_

List three pieces of evidence contrary to your negative core belief.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

# A List of the Most Common Cognitive Distortions

Beck and Burns are not the only two researchers who have dedicated their careers to learn more about depression, cognitive distortions, and treatment for these conditions. There are many others who have picked up the torch for this research, often with their own take on cognitive distortions. As such, there are numerous cognitive distortions floating around in the literature, but we'll limit this list to the most common sixteen. The first eleven distortions come straight from Burns' *Feeling Good Handbook* (1989).

## 1. All-or-Nothing Thinking / Polarized Thinking

Also known as "Black-and-White Thinking," this distortion manifests as an inability or unwillingness to see shades of gray. In other words, you see things in terms of extremes – something is either fantastic or awful, you believe you are either perfect or a total failure.

## 2. Overgeneralization

This sneaky distortion takes one instance or example and generalizes it to an overall pattern. For example, a student may receive a C on one test and conclude that she is stupid and a failure. Overgeneralizing can lead to overly negative thoughts about yourself and your environment based on only one or two experiences.

## 3. Mental Filter

Similar to overgeneralization, the mental filter distortion focuses on a single negative piece of information and excludes all the positive ones. An example of this distortion is one partner in a romantic relationship dwelling on a single negative comment made by the other partner and viewing the relationship as hopelessly lost, while ignoring the years of positive comments and experiences.

The mental filter can foster a decidedly pessimistic view of everything around you by focusing only on the negative.

## 4. Disqualifying the Positive

On the flip side, the "Disqualifying the Positive" distortion acknowledges positive experiences but rejects them instead of embracing them.

For example, a person who receives a positive review at work might reject the idea that they are a competent employee and attribute the positive review to political correctness, or to their boss simply not wanting to talk about their employee's performance problems. This is an especially malignant distortion since it can facilitate the continuation of negative thought patterns even in the face of strong evidence to the contrary.

## 5. Jumping to Conclusions – Mind Reading

This "Jumping to Conclusions" distortion manifests as the inaccurate belief that we know what another person is thinking. Of course, it is possible to have an idea of what other people are thinking, but this distortion refers to the negative interpretations that we jump to.

Seeing a stranger with an unpleasant expression and jumping to the conclusion that they are thinking something negative about you is an example of this distortion.

## **6. Jumping to Conclusions – Fortune Telling**

A sister distortion to mind reading, fortune telling refers to the tendency to make conclusions and predictions based on little to no evidence and holding them as gospel truth.

One example of fortune-telling is a young, single woman predicting that she will never find love or have a committed and happy relationship based only on the fact that she has not found it yet. There is simply no way for her to know how her life will turn out, but she sees this prediction as fact rather than one of several possible outcomes.

## **7. Magnification (Catastrophizing) or Minimization**

Also known as the “Binocular Trick” for its stealthy skewing of your perspective, this distortion involves exaggerating or minimizing the meaning, importance, or likelihood of things.

An athlete who is generally a good player but makes a mistake may magnify the importance of that mistake and believe that he is a terrible teammate, while an athlete who wins a coveted award in her sport may minimize the importance of the award and continue believing that she is only a mediocre player.

## **8. Emotional Reasoning**

This may be one of the most surprising distortions to many readers, and it is also one of the most important to identify and address. The logic behind this distortion is not surprising to most people; rather, it is the realization that virtually all of us have bought into this distortion at one time or another.

Emotional reasoning refers to the acceptance of one’s emotions as fact. It can be described as “*I feel it, therefore it must be true.*” Just because we feel something doesn’t mean it is true; for example, we may become jealous and think our partner has feelings for someone else, but that doesn’t make it true. Of course, we know it isn’t reasonable to take our feelings as fact, but it is a common distortion nonetheless.

Relevant: [What is Emotional Intelligence? + 18 Ways to Improve It](#)

## **9. Should Statements**

Another particularly damaging distortion is the tendency to make “should” statements. Should statements are statements that you make to yourself about what you “should” do, what you “ought” to do, or what you “must” do. They can also be applied to others, imposing a set of expectations that will likely not be met.

When we hang on too tightly to our “should” statements about ourselves, the result is often guilt that we cannot live up to them. When we cling to our “should” statements about others, we are generally disappointed by their failure to meet our expectations, leading to anger and resentment.

## **10. Labeling and Mislabeled**

These tendencies are basically extreme forms of overgeneralization, in which we assign judgments of value to ourselves or to others based on one instance or experience.

For example, a student who labels herself as “an utter fool” for failing an assignment is engaging in this distortion, as is the waiter who labels a customer “a grumpy old miser” if he fails to thank the waiter for bringing his food. Mislabeled refers to the application of highly emotional, loaded, and inaccurate or unreasonable language when labeling.

## **11. Personalization**

As the name implies, this distortion involves taking everything personally or assigning blame to yourself without any logical reason to believe you are to blame.

This distortion covers a wide range of situations, from assuming you are the reason a friend did not enjoy the girls' night out, to the more severe examples of believing that you are the cause for every instance of moodiness or irritation in those around you.

In addition to these basic cognitive distortions, Beck and Burns have mentioned a few others (Beck, 1976; Burns, 1980):

### **12. Control Fallacies**

A control fallacy manifests as one of two beliefs: (1) that we have no control over our lives and are helpless victims of fate, or (2) that we are in complete control of ourselves and our surroundings, giving us responsibility for the feelings of those around us. Both beliefs are damaging, and both are equally inaccurate.

No one is in complete control of what happens to them, and no one has absolutely no control over their situation. Even in extreme situations where an individual seemingly has no choice in what they do or where they go, they still have a certain amount of control over how they approach their situation mentally.

### **13. Fallacy of Fairness**

While we would all probably prefer to operate in a world that is fair, the assumption of an inherently fair world is not based in reality and can foster negative feelings when we are faced with proof of life's unfairness.

A person who judges every experience by its perceived fairness has fallen for this fallacy, and will likely feel anger, resentment, and hopelessness when they inevitably encounter a situation that is not fair.

### **14. Fallacy of Change**

Another 'fallacy' distortion involves expecting others to change if we pressure or encourage them enough. This distortion is usually accompanied by a belief that our happiness and success rests on other people, leading us to believe that forcing those around us to change is the only way to get what we want.

A man who thinks "If I just encourage my wife to stop doing the things that irritate me, I can be a better husband and a happier person" is exhibiting the fallacy of change.

### **15. Always Being Right**

Perfectionists and those struggling with Imposter Syndrome will recognize this distortion – it is the belief that we must always be right. For those struggling with this distortion, the idea that we could be wrong is absolutely unacceptable, and we will fight to the metaphorical death to prove that we are right.

For example, the internet commenters who spend hours arguing with each other over an opinion or political issue far beyond the point where reasonable individuals would conclude that they should "agree to disagree" are engaging in the "Always Being Right" distortion. To them, it is not simply a matter of a difference of opinion, it is an intellectual battle that must be won at all costs.

### **16. Heaven's Reward Fallacy**

This distortion is a popular one, and it's easy to see myriad examples of this fallacy playing out on big and small screens across the world. The "Heaven's Reward Fallacy" manifests as a belief that one's struggles, one's suffering, and one's hard work will result in a just reward.

It is obvious why this type of thinking is a distortion – how many examples can you think of, just within the realm of your personal acquaintances, where hard work and sacrifice did not pay off?

Sometimes no matter how hard we work or how much we sacrifice, we will not achieve what we hope to achieve. To think otherwise is a potentially damaging pattern of thought that can result in disappointment, frustration, anger, and even depression when the awaited reward does not materialize.

## **Changing Your Thinking: Examples of Techniques to Combat Cognitive Distortions**

These distortions, while common and potentially extremely damaging, are not something we must simply resign ourselves to living with.

Beck, Burns, and other researchers in this area have developed numerous ways to identify, challenge, minimize, or erase these distortions from our thinking.

Some of the most effective and evidence-based techniques and resources are listed below.

### **Cognitive Distortions Handout**

Since you must first identify the distortions you struggle with before you can effectively challenge them, this resource is a must-have.

The Cognitive Distortions handout lists and describes several types of cognitive distortions to help you figure out which ones you might be dealing with.

The distortions listed include:

- All-or-Nothing Thinking;
- Overgeneralizing;
- Discounting the Positive;
- Jumping to Conclusions;
- Mind Reading;
- Fortune Telling;
- Magnification (Catastrophizing) and Minimizing;
- Emotional Reasoning;
- Should Statements;
- Labeling and Mislabeled;
- Personalization.

The descriptions are accompanied by helpful descriptions and a couple of examples. This information can be found in the [Increasing Awareness of Cognitive Distortions](#) exercise in the Positive Psychology Practitioner's Toolkit.

### **Automatic Thought Record**

This worksheet is an excellent tool for identifying and understanding your cognitive distortions. Our automatic, negative thoughts are often related to a distortion that we may or may not realize we have. Completing this exercise can help you to figure out where you are making inaccurate assumptions or jumping to false conclusions.

The worksheet is split into six columns:

- Date/Time
- Situation
- Automatic Thoughts (ATs)
- Emotion/s
- Your Response
- A More Adaptive Response

First, you note the date and time of the thought.

In the second column, you will write down the situation. Ask yourself:

- What led to this event?
- What caused the unpleasant feelings I am experiencing?

The third component of the worksheet directs you to write down the negative automatic thought, including any images or feelings that accompanied the thought. You will consider the thoughts and images that went through your mind, write them down, and determine how much you believed these thoughts.

After you have identified the thought, the worksheet instructs you to note the emotions that ran through your mind along with the thoughts and images identified. Ask yourself what emotions you felt at the time and how intense the emotions were on a scale from 1 (barely felt it) to 10 (completely overwhelming).

Next, you have an opportunity to come up with an adaptive response to those thoughts. This is where the real work happens, where you identify the distortions that are cropping up and challenge them.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Which cognitive distortions were you employing?
- What is the evidence that the automatic thought(s) is true, and what evidence is there that it is not true?
- You've thought about the worst that can happen, but what's the best that could happen? What's the most realistic scenario?
- How likely are the best-case and most realistic scenarios?

Finally, you will consider the outcome of this event. Think about how much you believe the automatic thought now that you've come up with an adaptive response, and rate your belief. Determine what emotion(s) you are feeling now and at what intensity you are experiencing them.

You can access the [Automatic Thought Record Worksheet](#) here.

### **Decatastrophizing**

This is a particularly good tool for talking yourself out of catastrophizing a situation.



The worksheet begins with a description of cognitive distortions in general and catastrophizing in particular; catastrophizing is when you distort the importance or meaning of a problem to be much worse than it is, or you assume that the worst possible scenario is going to come to pass. It's a reinforcing distortion, as you get more and more anxious the more you think about it, but there are ways to combat it. First, write down your worry. Identify the issue you are catastrophizing by answering the question, "What are you worried about?"

Once you have articulated the issue that is worrying you, you can move on to thinking about how this issue will turn out.

Think about how terrible it would be if the catastrophe actually came to pass. What is the worst-case scenario? Consider whether a similar event has occurred in your past and, if so, how often it occurred. With the frequency of this catastrophe in mind, make an educated guess of how likely the worst-case scenario is to happen.

After this, think about what is most likely to happen—not the best possible outcome, not the worst possible outcome, but the most likely. Consider this scenario in detail and write it down. Note how likely you think this scenario is to happen as well.

Next, think about your chances of surviving in one piece. How likely is it that you'll be okay one week from now if your fear comes true? How likely is it that you'll be okay in one month? How about one year? For all three, write down "Yes" if you think you'd be okay and "No" if you don't think you'd be okay.

Finally, come back to the present and think about how you feel right now. Are you still just as worried, or did the exercise help you think a little more realistically? Write down how you're feeling about it.

This worksheet can be an excellent resource for anyone who is worrying excessively about a potentially negative event.

You can download the [Decatastrophizing Worksheet](#) here.

### **Cataloging Your Inner Rules**

Cognitive distortions include assumptions and rules that we hold dearly or have decided we must live by. Sometimes these rules or assumptions help us to stick to our values or our moral code, but often they can limit and frustrate us.

This exercise can help you to think more critically about an assumption or rule that may be harmful.

First, think about a recent scenario where you felt bad about your thoughts or behavior afterward. Write down a description of the scenario and the infraction (what you did to break the rule).

Next, based on your infraction, identify the rule or assumption that was broken. What are the parameters of the rule? How does it compel you to think or act?

Once you have described the rule or assumption, think about where it came from.

Consider when you acquired this rule, how you learned about it, and what was happening in your life that encouraged you to adopt it. What makes you think it's a good rule to have?

Now that you have outlined a definition of the rule or assumption and its origins and impact on your life, you can move on to comparing its advantages and disadvantages.

Every rule or assumption we follow will likely have both advantages and disadvantages.

The presence of one advantage does not mean the rule or assumption is necessarily a good one, just as the presence of one disadvantage does not automatically make the

rule or assumption a bad one. This is where you must think critically about how the rule or assumption helps and/or hurts you.

Finally, you have an opportunity to think about everything you have listed and decide to either accept the rule as it is, throw it out entirely and create a new one, or modify it into a rule that would suit you better. This may be a small change or a big modification.

If you decide to change the rule or assumption, the new version should maximize the advantages of the rule, minimize or limit the disadvantages, or both. Write down this new and improved rule and consider how you can put it into practice in your daily life. You can download the [Cataloging Your Inner Rules Worksheet](#).

### **Facts or Opinions?**

This is one of the first lessons that participants in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) learn – that facts are not opinions. As obvious as this seems, it can be difficult to remember and adhere to this fact in your day to day life.

This exercise can help you learn the difference between fact and opinion, and prepare you to distinguish between your own opinions and facts.

The worksheet lists the following fifteen statements and asks the reader to decide whether they are fact or opinion:

- I am a failure.
- I'm uglier than him/her.
- I said "no" to a friend in need.
- A friend in need said "no" to me.
- I suck at everything.
- I yelled at my partner.
- I can't do anything right.
- He said some hurtful things to me.
- She didn't care about hurting me.
- This will be an absolute disaster.
- I'm a bad person.
- I said things I regret.
- I'm shorter than him.
- I am not loveable.
- I'm selfish and uncaring.
- Everyone is a way better person than I am.
- Nobody could ever love me.
- I am overweight for my height.
- I ruined the evening.
- I failed my exam.

Practicing making this distinction between fact and opinion can improve your ability to quickly differentiate between the two when they pop up in your own thoughts.

Here is the Facts or Opinions Worksheet.

In case you're wondering which is which, here is the key:

- I am a failure. *False*
- I'm uglier than him/her. *False*
- I said "no" to a friend in need. *True*
- A friend in need said "no" to me. *True*
- I suck at everything. *False*
- I yelled at my partner. *True*
- I can't do anything right. *False*
- He said some hurtful things to me. *True*
- She didn't care about hurting me. *False*
- This will be an absolute disaster. *False*
- I'm a bad person. *False*
- I said things I regret. *True*
- I'm shorter than him. *True*
- I am not loveable. *False*
- I'm selfish and uncaring. *False*
- Everyone is a way better person than I am. *False*
- Nobody could ever love me. *False*
- I am overweight for my height. *True*
- I ruined the evening. *False*
- I failed my exam. *True*

### **Putting Thoughts on Trial**

This exercise uses CBT theory and techniques to help you examine your irrational thoughts. You will act as the defense attorney, prosecutor, and judge all at once, providing evidence for and against the irrational thought and evaluating the merit of the thought based on this evidence.

The worksheet begins with an explanation of the exercise and a description of the roles you will be playing.

The first box to be completed is "The Thought." This is where you write down the irrational thought that is being put on trial.

Next, you fill out "The Defense" box with evidence that corroborates or supports the thought. Once you have listed all of the defense's evidence, do the same for "The Prosecution" box. Write down all of the evidence calling the thought into question or instilling doubt in its accuracy.

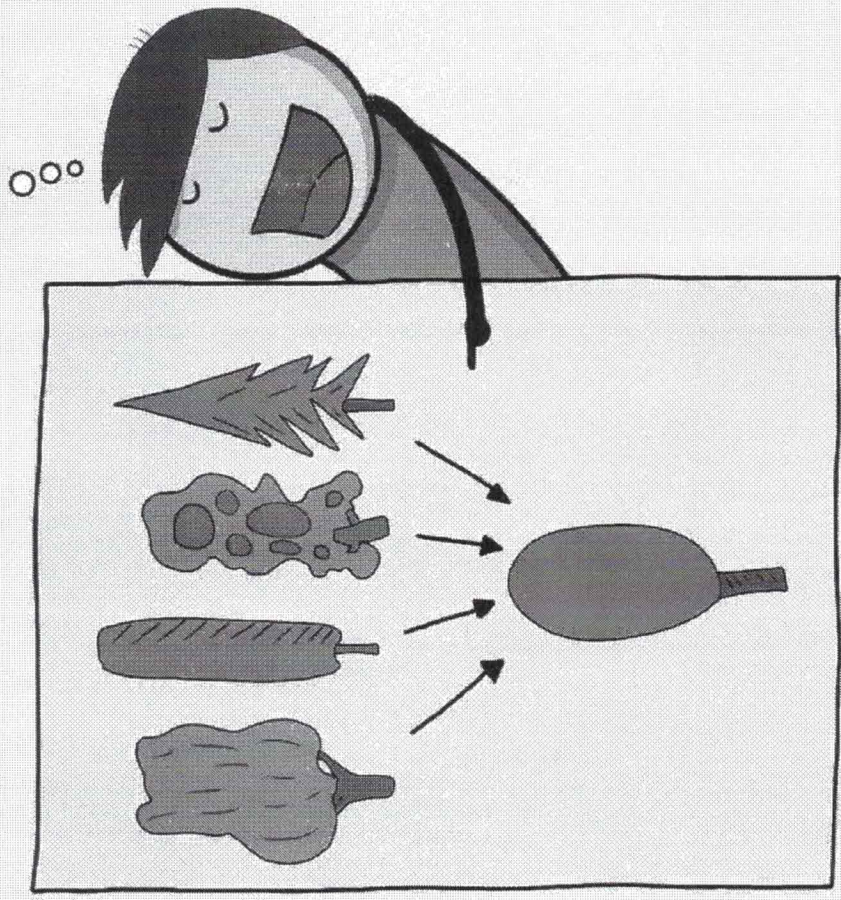
When you have listed all of the evidence you can think of, both for and against the thought, evaluate the evidence and write down the results of your evaluation in "The Judge's Verdict" box.

This worksheet is a fun and engaging way to think critically about your negative or irrational thoughts and make good decisions about which thoughts to modify and which to embrace.

WHAT EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT THINGS COULD NOW BE DIFFERENT?

# OVERGENERALIZING

THE TENDENCY TO MAKE BROAD GENERALIZATIONS BASED UPON A SINGLE EVENT AND MINIMAL EVIDENCE.



## **6. OVERGENERALIZATION**

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Overgeneralization is a thinking error where we tend to make broad generalizations that are based on a single event and minimal evidence. More specifically, it's the tendency to use our past experiences as a reference point for making assumptions about present or future circumstances. In other words, you are essentially using a past event to predict the future. For instance, whenever you say that "Everyone always... She never..." this highlights an overgeneralization. In order to successfully work through this cognitive distortion, question whether evidence exists that suggests things could be different.

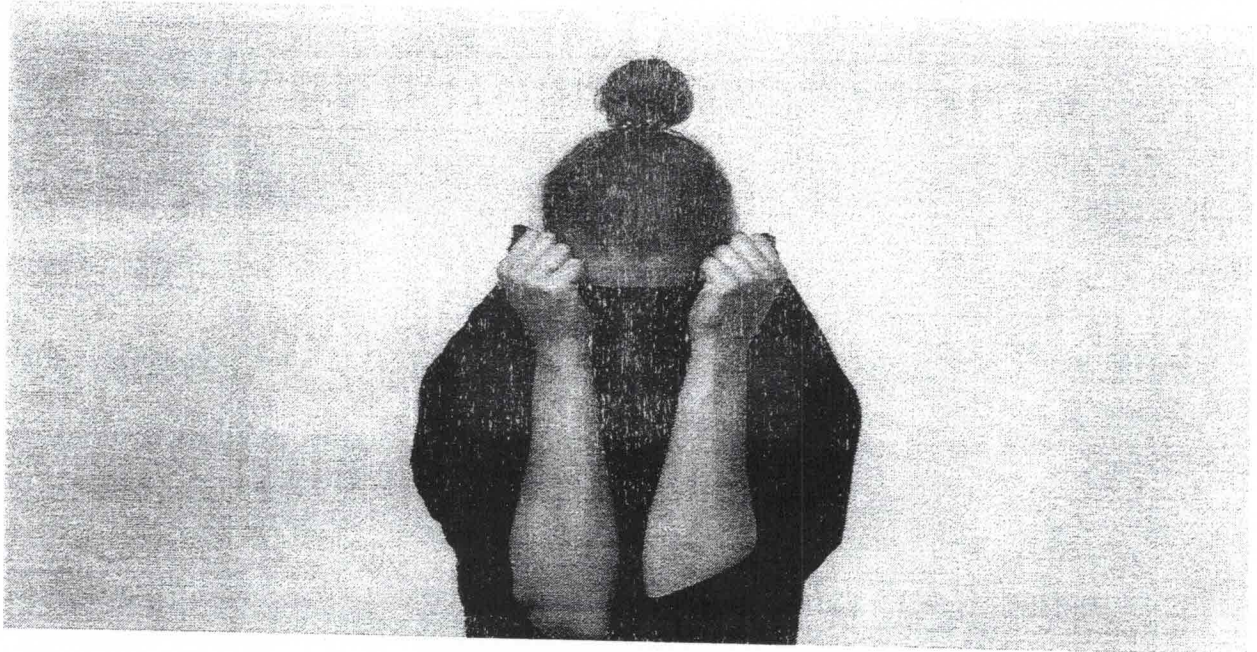
## 39. MAGICAL THINKING



- Magical thinking is the idea of believing that the laws of the universe, physics, economics, or cause and effect, don't apply to us.
- Magical thinking is also described as the belief that thoughts and reality are connected and that thinking can influence the actual world.
- For example, believing in miracles, being superstitious (example, "I'm feeling better this morning, but if I tell anyone the pain might get worse") or trusting that wishful thinking will cause the outcome we are hoping for.
- Magical thinking especially comes out when a high degree of chance, accident, hope, fear, and danger are perceived.

## Personalization

The tendency to place the blame on yourself when you aren't solely responsible or placing the blame on other people and ignoring your role in the situation.



**The personalization thinking error** occurs when a person believes most of the things other people do or say is some kind of direct personal reaction to something they said or did. It is thinking that external events or other people's actions are somehow your fault or something that you can control. Personalization involves blaming yourself when you weren't entirely responsible.

- If he had been ready to leave on time, I wouldn't have eaten that extra donut and my stomach wouldn't be hurting.
- I just had to write him up for insubordination. I didn't train him well enough.
- My coworker is upset about not getting the project. I wouldn't have tried so hard to get it myself if I had known he wanted it so bad.

responsibility for our lives and circumstances. In fact, it is quite admirable! However, taking ownership of the entire outcome of a bad situation can be harmful if it causes you to feel like a victim of circumstance.

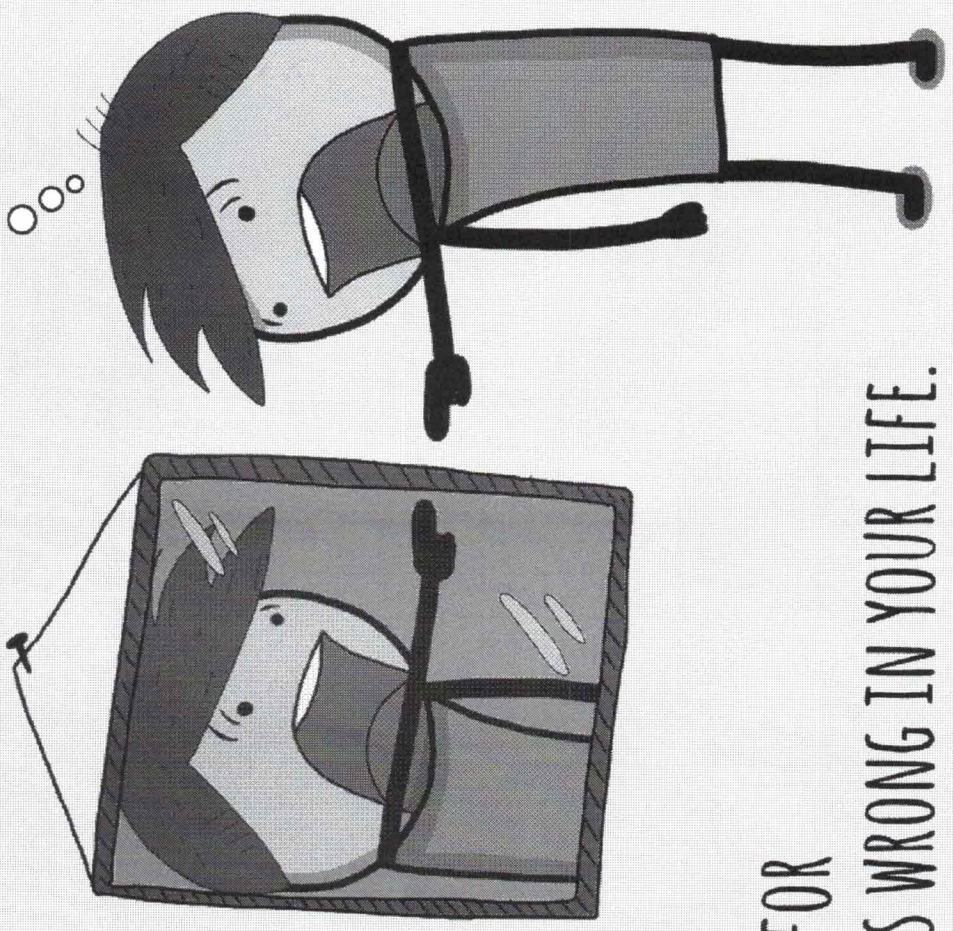
**Thought Untwisted: Don't take it personal.**

To correct the personalization cognitive distortion, try to notice when you are taking something too personally and **remind yourself that it isn't about you**. Try to recognize how you are feeling in those moments— whether embarrassed, angry, or anxious. If you can identify your feelings you may be able to watch out for this thinking error and head it off when you see it coming.

If blame is what you often feel when faced with bad situations, ask yourself, who else played a part in this? Think about what part you played in the situation and consider how you might not be entirely to blame. It is important to remember that you can influence others, but you cannot control them. They are ultimately responsible for their own actions. Remember that even if you are in a position of influence like a doctor, teacher, parent, supervisor, clergy, etc., you can't really be expected to control the decisions of others. In fact, you can't gain control of a situation until you are in full control of yourself.



WHO OR WHAT ELSE COULD HAVE PLAYED A PART IN THIS?



# PERSONALIZATION

THE TENDENCY TO TAKE THE BLAME FOR ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING THAT GOES WRONG IN YOUR LIFE.

### **3. PERSONALIZATION**

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Personalization is a thinking error where we consistently take the blame for absolutely everything that goes wrong with our life. Whenever anything doesn't work out as expected, we immediately take the blame for this misfortune — irrelevant of whether or not we are responsible for the outcome. Taking responsibility for our life and circumstances, is of course quite admirable, but at the same time completely unhelpful if we end up feeling like a victim of circumstance. In order to successfully work through this cognitive distortion, question what part you played in the outcome and how you might not be entirely to blame.