
Information from your Patient Aligned Care Team

Cognitive Distortions

We all tend to think in extremes...and when traumatic events happen we think that way even more. Here are some common cognitive distortions. Take a look and see if any of them are getting in your way.

- **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.
- **Overgeneralization:** You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
- **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.
- **Disqualifying the Positive:** You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or other. You maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.
- **Jumping to Conclusions:** You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.
- **Mind Reading:** You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you and don't bother to check it out.
- **The Fortune Teller Error:** You anticipate that things will turn out badly and feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact.
- **Magnification (catastrophizing) or Minimization:** You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up or someone else's achievement), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other fellow's imperfections). This is also called the "binocular trick."

Cognitive Distortions (continued)

- Emotional reasoning: You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true."
- Should Statements: You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn'ts, 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. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.
- Labeling and Mislabeled: This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. 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 him, "He's a damn louse." Mislabeled involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.
- Personalization: You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event for which, in fact, you were not primarily responsible.

From: Burns, David D., MD. (1989). *The Feeling Good Handbook*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.