

15 Styles of Distorted Thinking

1. **Filtering:** You take the negative details and magnify them, while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation. A single detail may be picked out, and the whole event becomes colored by this detail.

2. **Polarized Thinking:** The hallmark of this distortion is an insistence on dichotomous choices. Things are black or white, good or bad. You tend to perceive everything at the extremes, with very little room for a middle ground. For example—You have to be perfect or you're a failure.

3. **Overgeneralization:** You come to a general conclusion based on a single incident or piece of evidence. If something bad happens once, you expect it to happen over and over again.

4. **Mind Reading:** You assume to know what people are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, you are able to divine how people are feeling toward you. Mind readers jump to conclusions that are true for them, without checking whether they are true for the other person.

5. **Catastrophizing:** You expect disaster. You notice or hear about a problem and start "what if's." What if that happens to me? What if tragedy strikes? An underlying catalyst for this style of thinking is that you do not trust in yourself and your capacity to adapt to change.

6. **Personalization:** This is the tendency to relate everything around you to yourself. For example, thinking that everything people do or say is some kind of reaction to you. You also compare yourself to others, trying to determine who's smarter, better looking, etc. The underlying assumption is that your worth is in question. You are therefore continually forced to test your value as a person by measuring yourself against others.

7. **Control Fallacies:** There are two ways you can distort your sense of power and control. If you feel externally controlled, you see yourself as helpless, a victim of fate. The fallacy of internal control has you responsible for the pain and happiness of everyone around you. Feeling externally controlled keeps you stuck. You don't believe you can really affect the basic shape of your life, let alone make any difference in the world.

8. **Fallacy of Fairness:** You feel resentful because you think you know what's fair, but other people won't agree with you. It is tempting to make assumptions about how things would change if people were only fair or really valued you. But the other person hardly ever sees it that way, and you end up causing yourself a

lot of pain and an ever-growing resentment.

9. **Blaming:** You hold other people responsible for your pain, or take the other tack and blame yourself for every problem. Blaming often involves making someone else responsible for choices and decisions that are actually our own responsibility. In blame systems, you deny your own right (and responsibility) to assert your needs, say no, or go elsewhere for what you want.

10. **Shoulds:** You have a list of ironclad rules about how you and other people should act. People who break the rules anger you, and you feel guilty if you violate the rules. The rules are right and indisputable and, as a result, you are often in the position of judging and finding fault (in yourself and in others). Cue words indicating the presence of this distortion are should, ought, and must.

11. **Emotional Reasoning:** You believe that what you feel must be true—automatically. If you *feel* stupid or boring, then you must *be* stupid and boring. If you feel guilty, then you must have done something wrong. The problem with emotional reasoning is that our emotions interact and correlate with our thinking process. Therefore, if you have distorted thoughts and beliefs, your emotions will reflect these distortions.

12. **Fallacy of Change:** You expect that other people will change to suit you if you just pressure or cajole them enough. You need to change people because your hopes for happiness seem to depend entirely on them. The truth is the only person you can really control or have much hope of changing is you. The underlying assumption of this thinking style is that your happiness depends on the actions of others. Your happiness actually depends on the thousands of large and small choices you make in your life.

13. **Global Labeling:** You generalize one or two qualities (in yourself or others) into a negative global judgment. Global labeling ignores all contrary evidence, creating a view of the world that can be stereotyped and one-dimensional. Labeling yourself can have a negative and insidious impact upon your self-esteem; while labeling others can lead to snap-judgments, relationship problems, and prejudice.

14. **Being Right:** You feel continually on trial to prove that your opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and you will go to any length to demonstrate your rightness. Having to be 'right' often makes you hard of hearing. You aren't interested in the possible veracity of a differing opinion, only in defending your own. Being right becomes more important than an honest and caring relationship.

15. Heaven's Reward Fallacy: You expect all your sacrifice and self-denial to pay off, as if there were someone keeping score. You feel bitter when the reward doesn't come as expected. The problem is that while you are always doing the 'right thing,' if your heart really isn't in it, you are physically and emotionally depleting yourself.

**From Thoughts & Feelings by McKay, Davis, & Fanning. New Harbinger, 1981. These styles of thinking (or cognitive distortions) were gleaned from the work of several authors, including Albert Ellis, Aaron Beck, and David Burns, among others.*