



Cognitive Distortions

As human beings, we are meaning makers. We use our language to give meaning to the world around us, so we are informed on how to respond to certain situations/experiences/etc. Our meanings aren't always of the highest quality, though, which can lead to us feeling stuck, dragon states, etc. In coaching we uncover the way we have created meaning so that we can see whether it is either enhancing or limiting us.

One way we do this, is by checking for cognitive distortions. These are distorted thoughts, beliefs, representations, and decisions. This can create some very troubling emotions and responses. Being able to identify how you are distorting your experience, you are better equipped to choose a different way of meaning making.

In this document I am sharing a list of cognitive distortions with you as well as the cognitive clearings.

Cognitive Distortion	Problem it creates	Cognitive clearing
Over-generalizing Taking only a few facts, or none at all, and jumping to premature conclusions assuming them to be true. Assuming a negative experience to be pervasive.	Limits finer distinctions, and blinds to possibilities for solutions	Contextual thinking Inquire about the context of the information by asking: what, where, which, who, why. Ask about specifics. Outcome: clarity and precision
All-or-nothing thinking Polarizing at extremes, hence, black-or-white thinking. Either-or thinking that posits options as two-valued choices, either this or that. Gives no other choices, nothing in the middle. Aristotle's "excluded middle."	Eliminates and hides all values in between the polar choices. Sets up extremes as in manic-depression Undermines creativity and choices. Creates obsessions, compulsions.	Both-and / In-between thinking Test situation to see if there is some option in-between the extremes. To what degree? Gauge for percentages, scale from 0 to 10. Check contexts. Outcome: expands choice
Labeling Assuming that a name or label can accurately and adequately describe something. Labeling over-generalizes to reduce reality to just a word, confusing a verbal map with the territory.	Sells a person short by putting into a box and assuming that's all the person is. Hides reality in a label.	Reality testing Ask: Is this just a label, just a word? Explore: In what way is it bad, undesirable? What are you referring to? When? Where? Under what conditions? Outcome: more accurate mapping.
Blaming	Limits recognizing	Responsibility thinking

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Accusatory thinking that transfers blame and responsibility for a problem to someone or something else.	response-ability. Wastes energy accusing someone. Blinds one to responses for change. Impairs power of responsibility.	Ask: what am I response-able for? To whom? Is this a response that others make? Question the nominalization – What is the process? The action? What action has been “named” (nominalized)? What is the system? Who is in it? How does the system work? Outcome: Clarity, see processes rather than things.
Mind-reading Projecting thoughts, feelings, intuitions onto others without checking our guesses with the person, over-trusting our "intuitions" about other people and seeing them through the lens of our mental filters rather than checking out our interpretations and assumptions.	Limits seeing and dealing with a person based on facts of sensory data. Projects beliefs onto others.	Current sensory information What are the facts? See-hear-feel facts? Ask: How do you know that? How draw that conclusion? What are the probabilities? What are you feeling or thinking? Outcome: straightens out relationship, encourages dialogue, keep things present.
Prophecy Projecting negative outcomes into the future without seeing alternatives or possible ways to proactively intervene. Seeing problems and hurts as permanent, and never-ending.	Limits hope, belief, vision, dreaming, possibilities. Makes problems permanent and so eliminates solutions.	Tentative predictive thinking Study trends, factors, and causes that contribute to an experience. Study consequences and probabilities. Outcome: Opens future, identifies leverage points, increase ability to influence.
Emotionalizing Taking counsel of one's emotions as an infallible source for reality, assuming that if feeling an emotion makes it must real and that one must act on that feeling. “If I want something, I should have it.” “My wishing will make it real.”	Limits choice by creating an emotional determinism. Impairs healthy use of emotions.	Witness-thinking Step back and just observe. Witness senses, facts, activities without making any judgment. Suspend evaluation; witness what is. Outcome: increases choices and options, stops the coloring of things by emotions, obtain cleaner information.
Personalizing Perceiving circumstances and actions of others as targeted toward yourself, perceiving world through the ego-centric filter that everything, or most things, is about yourself. Ego-centric thinking.	Limits clear perceptions. Blinds one to seeing world through one's ego filters.	Objective thinking Step back and take second or third perceptual position; What does this look like from neutral observer? Could this be about the source rather than me? Outcome: make things more objective, gain clean information, distinguish self and world.

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Awfulizing Emotionalizing + Labeling = Awfulizing Imagining the worst possible scenario and amplifying it with the word "Awful" ("This is awful!") without any clear indication about what awful actually refers to. It takes an unpleasant event and spreads it around to other aspects of life, making it pervasive.	Limits problem-solving skills. Prevents one from working on creative solutions. Misdirects energy to whining and complaining.	Meta-cognitive thinking Ask about patterns and structures above and beyond the story and content. Identify thinking patterns. Question words and terms for what they refer to. Outcome: Expand awareness of factors in the back of the mind, see and identify patterns and leverage points of change.
Should-ing Using the words "should" or "must" to pressure yourself and others to conform to rules. When using "must," we are "musterbating" (Ellis). "The tyranny of the shoulds" (Horney)	Limits a sense of choice. Leashes one to a sense of dreadful duty. Eliminates sense of choice.	Choice thinking Test "should," "must," and "have to." Why? Who says? What is the rule? What is the demand? Change to "want" or "prefer." Outcome: prevents addiction and build up of pressure. Keeps wants and desires healthy.
Filtering Over-focusing on one facet of something to the exclusive of everything else to create a tunnel vision perspective. Filtering out what's positive and solutions.	Limits full perspective. Blinds one from seeing beyond the tunnel vision.	Perspective thinking Step back and identify filters that create tunnel vision. Take third-person perspective to empathize with another's view Outcome: expands awareness to see other perspectives.
Impossibility thinking Imposing semantic limits on oneself and others using the word "can't" which presupposes that there is some law or rule that constrains us from doing something.	Limits ideas about what's possible. Stunts ideas of human potential Impairs ability to dream and to take risks.	Possibility thinking Test "can'ts." Is physical or psychological "can't?" Ask: What stops you? "Do you have permission? "What would it look, sound or feel like?"
Discounting The mental attitude of rejecting and/or putting down by disqualifying possible solutions, successes, or possibilities(as in, "That doesn't count," "That's nothing."). "It could have been better."	Limits small approximates of success and solutions from being recognized and developed.	Appreciative thinking Ask: What counts for you? In what way?How can this be valued? For what? What else? Do you have permission to make mistakes? Outcome: Reinforce small steps, enrich sense of value, awaken appreciation.

Identifying Treating two things as if the same. Confusing levels. Using the "to be" verb to create identifications: "He is," "she is," "they are."	Confuses things, fails to make distinctions, limits self-definition to identifications	E-prime / dis-identifying Challenge and replace "to be" verbs with verbs that actually describe what a person is doing. Not: "I am a father" but "I father..."
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Thinking Styles

Another way of detecting anything holding us back from being our best in the way we have given meaning, is through your thinking style. This is the lens we use to interpret what happens around us.

The following 12 thinking styles describe *the kinds of lenses* we use when we look at people, events, and information. You can use the following to profile your preferences and tendencies. Identify where you operate from with a check and then indicate the range of flexibility with brackets.

Internal Referencing — — — — — **External Referencing**

People with internal as a preference know from within whether they did something well or not so good. They rely on their own inner frame of reference. They collect information and use their intuition to decide. Typical expressions are "I had that feeling" or "I simply knew it." They have autonomy in their decisions. They know by themselves what is right.

It is difficult to persuade these people in case of a different opinion. They react less to praise or criticism. Both will rather be used to judge whether the other understands the subject or not. For them it is helpful to learn to listen to proposals and feedback from others.

People with this preference are open minded in their decisions. They want to know what others think. "Someone has to tell me" or "I was appreciated". They have to get the information for evaluation from the outside. They want to know what others think of them. They react to positive comments or critique. Persons with strong external references need information from outside sources to know where they stand. Thus they are less autonomous. For them, it is helpful to learn not to get too influenced by others and to rely on people whom you know very



well and whom you can trust.

Reactive ————— Active

If a report would need to be written with a four week deadline, a person with the Active thinking preference would start to prepare the report after maybe two weeks time. Changes are dealt with at once and spontaneously. This thinking preference is important for short reaction times.

A person with the reactive thinking preference would begin to write during the last two or three days. Changes are dealt with only after thorough reflection. This preference is useful in quality control jobs.

Abstract ————— Concrete

People with the abstract preference prefer to think in combinations, principles, and symbols. They would start such a project with drawings and plans before realising it. This is the search for an abstract solution. People with this thinking preference are most likely watching efficiency rates, deadlines, transit rates, etc.

The people with the concrete preference concentrate on clear facts and examples. So the project could start with a concrete image or vision of how it can be started or of the final result. People with this thinking preference are taking care of who is doing what and when, how and where what can be done.

Long term ————— Short term

People with the long term preference put their emphasis on midterm or long-term consequences and effects. They tend to overlook short-term consequences. They prefer to use a time planner. They divide time globally. Long-term means to you in the current job situation:

The prime attention for short term is focused on the immediate or short-term consequences. They tend to ignore the long-term aspects. They have a more "southern" feeling of time. Their feeling for time is more like that of southern cultures and therefore they use time planners much less. This thinking preference is important for immediate reactions and for improvisation. Short-term means to you in the current job situation:

Global ————— Detail

People with the global preference generalise. They like to have an overview first. The chunks they are using carry rough and more global information. They



concentrate on the general direction of a project. They can easily see relations and basic structures. They work best when they can delegate details to others. Their learning style is from the Global to Details (deductive).

People using the details preference concentrate on the details of a job. Details are important to them. The chunks they are using carry many detailed bits of information and have a more fine structure. They deal with the elements and components of a project. Preciseness and accuracy is important to them. Their learning style is from Details to Global (inductive).

Options ————— Procedures

People with the options preference are motivated to find new solutions and to experiment with alternatives whenever they get a chance to do so. They ask: "How else could it work?". If you give them a process that promises 100 percent success, they tend to polish it even further. To them decisions mean limitations. They do not like decisions and if they happen to be Re-Active at the same time, they avoid decisions. They avoid or ignore rules and look for alternatives to the routine path. People in this preference can be motivated by giving them options, opportunities, alternatives and chances. They can easily develop procedures, but have difficulty in following them.

In the procedures preference people are looking for the right way and for proven procedures. They ask: "What do I have to do?". Their frame of reference is to do what is necessary. They like to go the official way and follow firm working structures. They have no problem deciding, any decision is a relief to them. Once they have found a procedure that works, they will always return to it.

They will be irritated or confused if someone asks them to break rules. "Why should I break rules which obviously worked?". Giving them proven procedures and processes can best motivate these people. If you do not provide them with procedures, they can become helpless. They have difficulty in developing procedures. They like to be given procedures and like to follow them.

Caring for Self ————— Caring for Others

To people with the caring for self preference it is more important to first concentrate on oneself. Probably they would realise that they need something to drink before they see that the others need something too before they go and get the drinks. This thinking preference is often used by athletes or in professions in which performance is very important.

People with the caring for others preference take care of others first. In our



example, they would notice that someone else needs something to drink and would go and get it. In this situation, they would likely get something to drink for themselves too. This thinking preference is often found in service and support jobs and in healing professions.

Difference ————— Sameness

People with a sameness preference look first in any new situation for whether this has something in common with previous experiences. They sometimes have difficulty in noticing differences and changes and they dislike major changes. They like the familiar things and the safety of the known. This preference is important to recognise patterns.

People with the difference thinking preference first recognise any differences based on their past experience. When they enter a new room or meet a new situation, they can immediately detect what is different compared with what they know from the past. They have difficulties in recognising patterns or similarities, and they like change. This thinking preference is important for spotting mistakes.

Relationship ————— Task

People who primarily concentrate on the persons involved are mainly concerned with the well-being of these persons. In case of a strong tendency towards this preference the task gets out of focus. They put their attention on people and on the team spirit. They tend to care for other people.

People with task orientation are mainly interested in getting the job done and reaching the goal. In the extreme, this can result in pushing colleagues or themselves too hard. They put their attention on the work or job to be done and to the related dates and deadlines. They are attracted by tasks.

Towards ————— Away From

People in this preference move towards a certain goal. They quickly leave the past behind and quickly address their tasks and goals. In extreme situations it can mean they want to get to the goal and overlook the problems on the way. Their motivation is the attractiveness of their goals. For them it is often helpful to find out what kind of problems may arise by achieving their goal.

Problem oriented people move away from all sorts of problems. They follow an avoidance-strategy, they like to avoid problems or difficulties, their attention is directed towards things that shall not happen. They can use this preference, their caution, positively to deliver high quality, to proceed in a safe manner and



thus become very reliable. They match very well with their "Towards" colleagues. They can best be motivated by being shown negative consequences. For them it is often helpful to find out what exactly they want to have instead of having the problem they are solving.