

Overcoming Cognitive Distortions

Based on the work of Dr David Burns

A cognitive distortion is a thought pattern that feels absolutely true but systematically misrepresents reality. Naming them is the first step to freedom from them.

THE 10 COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

1. All-or-Nothing Thinking

Seeing things in black and white. 'I made one mistake — I'm a complete failure.'

2. Overgeneralisation

Drawing sweeping conclusions from a single event. 'This always happens to me.'

3. Mental Filter

Focusing on one negative detail while filtering out all positives.

4. Disqualifying the Positive

Dismissing good experiences as exceptions. 'They only said that to be nice.'

5. Mind Reading

Assuming you know what others think — usually negatively.

6. Fortune Telling

Predicting the future negatively as if it's fact. 'This won't work out.'

7. Magnification / Minimisation

Making mountains out of molehills — and molehills out of your accomplishments.

8. Emotional Reasoning

Treating feelings as facts. 'I feel stupid, therefore I am stupid.'

9. Should Statements

Rigid rules generating shame rather than change. 'I should be further along by now.'

10. Personalisation

Taking excessive responsibility for things outside your control.

THE REFRAMING PROCESS

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When you notice a distorted thought, work through four steps:

- IDENTIFY: Write the thought down exactly as it appears
- NAME IT: Which distortion is this? (there may be more than one)
- EXAMINE: What is the evidence FOR this thought? What is the evidence AGAINST?
- REFRAKE: Write a more balanced, accurate statement — not a positive lie, but a truthful alternative

The goal isn't to think positively. It's to think accurately. A balanced thought acknowledges difficulty while refusing to exaggerate it.

— PRACTICE PROMPT

This week, when you notice a thought that feels very certain and very negative, pause and ask: 'Which distortion might be showing up here?' Naming it creates distance — and distance creates choice.