



10 Proven Methods for Fixing Cognitive Distortions

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Cognitive distortions have a way of playing havoc with our lives if we let them. A **cognitive distortion** takes place in our minds when we experience an upsetting event in our lives — a disagreement at work, an argument with a partner, a poor result in school — and we think about it in a way that reinforces negativity and feeling bad. While some may believe that “feeling bad” is a necessary component of learning from our mistakes, many get stuck in a repetitive, reinforcing pattern of feeling bad about themselves. This can lead to lower self-esteem and a self-fulfilling prophecy in future interactions.

Cognitive distortions — also known as “stinkin’ thinkin’” — can be undone, but it takes effort and lots of practice, every day. If you want to stop the irrational thinking, you can start by trying out the exercises below.

How to Fix Common Cognitive Distortions

You can use any one or a combination of the methods described below to combat irrational, automatic thoughts and cognitive distortions. Try a few of them out and look for the one that seems to work best for you, because different people respond to different ways of fixing their irrational thoughts.

1. Identify the Cognitive Distortion

The most important step of fixing any problem in your life is identifying exactly what the problem is and how extensive it is in your life. An auto mechanic starts with a diagnostic assessment of your car when it has a problem.

In this same manner, you need to identify and track the cognitive distortions in your daily thinking **first**, before you start working to change them. You do this by creating a list of the troublesome thoughts throughout the day, as you’re having them. This will allow you to examine them later for matches with a list of cognitive distortions.

An examination of your cognitive distortions allows you to see which distortions that you prefer. Additionally, this process allows you to think about each problem or predicament in a more natural or realistic manner. David Burns called this exercise keeping a daily mood log, but nowadays you can use an app or anything that’s convenient to record your cognitive distortions.

2. Examine the Evidence

Much like a judge overseeing a trial, the next step is to remove yourself from the emotionality of the upsetting event or episode of irrational thinking in order to examine the evidence more objectively. A thorough examination of an experience allows you to identify the basis for your distorted thoughts. If you are overly self-critical, you should identify a number of experiences and situations where you had success.

One effective method for examining the evidence is to look at individual thoughts connected to the event, and objectively decide whether those statements reflect an opinion or stone cold fact. For example, statements such as “I’m selfish” and “There’s something wrong with me” are opinions. “My co-worker spoke in angry voice toward me” and “I forgot to take out the trash” are facts. Segregating facts from opinions can help you determine which are likely to be a component of a cognitive distortion (the opinions) and therefore need your focus and efforts to undo.

3. Double Standard Method

An alternative to “self-talk” that is harsh and demeaning is to talk to ourselves in the same compassionate and caring way that we would talk with a friend in a similar situation. We are frequently much harder on ourselves than the people we care about in our lives, whether it be a friend or family member. We would never think of speaking to a close friend in the way we speak to ourselves in our own mind.

Instead of treating yourself with a different standard than what you hold everyone else to, why not use one single standard for everyone including yourself? Isn't that more fair than using a double-standard? Give yourself the same encouragement that you would a trusted friend.

Imagine studying for an exam and telling a friend, “You're going to screw this up, just like you screw everything else up!” Yet these are the same kinds of thoughts that run through many students' minds before an exam. Can you answer such automatic, negative thoughts back with a rational response? For example, “You're going to do well on this exam, I just know it. You studied hard for it and did your best to memorize the material. I believe in you.”

4. Thinking in Shades of Gray

Learning to undo black-and-white (or polarized) thinking can be challenging, because our minds take cognitive shortcuts to simplify processing of stimuli in order to hurry our ability to make a decision or choose a response. Black-and-white thinking can sometimes serve a good purpose, but it often leads a person down a path of irrational belief too.

Instead of thinking about a problem or predicament in an either-or polarity, thinking in shades of gray requires us to evaluate things on a scale of 0 through 100. When a plan or goal is not fully realized, think about and evaluate the experience as a partial success on this kind of scale.

For example, someone might think, “You can't do anything right. You just blew your diet by having that second bite of ice cream.” What is the likelihood that a person's entire dieting routine — that they've been following rigorously for months — is now made worthless by a single additional bite of ice cream? On our scale of 0 through 100, it might be about 1 percent likelihood.

5. Experimental Method

Can you test whether your irrational thoughts have any basis in fact outside of a trial? You sure can, by using the same kinds of methods that science uses in order to test a hypothesis.

For example, let's say you've been putting off organizing your digital photos because it'll be “too hard” or “I just can't do it.” What if the task was broken down into smaller parts, such as tackling just a single month at a time in one sitting? Is the thought that it's just “too hard” still true, now that you've broken the task into smaller, attainable components?

In another example, imagine a person who believes over time that she is no longer liked by her friends because they never connect with her on social media or call. Could that person test whether it was true that her friends no longer like her? What if she reached out to them and asked them out to lunch or for drinks one day? While it's not likely all of her friends will accept an invitation, it's likely at least one or two of them will, providing clear evidence in support of the fact that her friends still like her.

6. Survey Method

Similar to the experimental method, the survey method is focused on asking others in a similar situation about their experiences to determine how irrational our thoughts might be. Using this method, a person seeks the opinions of others regarding whether their thoughts and attitudes are realistic.

For example, a person might believe, “Romantic partners should never fight. And if they do fight, they should never go to bed angry at one another.” Who could they survey to see whether this is true or not? A few friends who appear to be in happy relationships might be a good start. That person would soon realize that all couples fight, and while it may be a good idea not to go to bed angry, plenty of people do and their relationship is just fine despite that.

If you want to double-check on the rationality of your thought, check in with a few trusted friends to see what their opinions and experiences are.

7. The Semantic Method

When a person engages in a series of should statements (“I should do this” or “I shouldn’t do that”), they are applying a set of unwritten rules to their behavior that may make little sense to others. Should statements imply a judgment about your or another person’s behavior — one that may be unhelpful and even hurtful.

Every time you find yourself using a should statement, try substituting “It would be nice if…” instead. This semantic difference can work wonders in your own mind, as you stop “should-ing” yourself to death and start looking at the world in a different, more positive manner. Shoulds make a person feel bad and guilt about themselves. “Wouldn’t it be nice and more healthy if I started watching what I ate more?” puts the thought into a more curious, inquisitive phrasing — one where the answer might be yes, but might also be no (for instance, if you’ve just started cancer treatment, now’s not a good time to change your eating habits).

8. Definitions

For people who are more intellectual and like to argue about minutiae, this method of arguing with your cognitive distortions might come in handy. What does it mean to define ourselves as “inferior,” “a loser,” “a fool,” or “abnormal.” An examination of these and other global labels may reveal that they more closely represent specific behaviors, or an identifiable behavior pattern, instead of the total person.

When a person starts delving into the definition of a label and asking questions about those definitions, the results can be surprising. For instance, what it does it mean to think of yourself as “inferior”? Inferior to who? Others at your workplace? What are their specific work experiences and backgrounds? Aren’t they all inferior to someone else too? The more questions you ask when challenging a definition or label, the more you may come to realize the uselessness of such labels — especially when applied to ourselves.

9. Re-attribution

In personalization and blaming cognitive distortions, a person will point the finger to themselves for all of the negative things they experience, no matter what the actual cause.

In re-attribution, a person identifies external factors and other individuals that contributed to the problem or event. Regardless of the degree of responsibility a person assumes, a person’s energy is best utilized in the pursuit of resolutions to problems or identifying ways to cope with predicaments. By assigning responsibility accordingly, you’re not trying to deflect blame, but ensure you’re not blaming yourself entirely for something that wasn’t entirely your fault.

For example, if a project at work failed to get done on time and you were one of the members of the 5-member team, you’re one-fifth to blame for the project missing its deadline. From an objective perspective, you are not entirely to blame for the missed deadline.

10. Cost-Benefit Analysis

This method for answering an irrational belief relies on motivation rather than facts to help a person undo the cognitive distortion. In this technique, it is helpful to list the advantages and disadvantages of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. A cost-benefit analysis will help to figure out what a person is gaining from feeling bad, distorted thinking, and inappropriate behavior.

“How will it help me to believe this negative, irrational thought, and how will it hurt me?” If you find the disadvantages of believing a thought outweigh the advantages, you’ll find it easier to talk back and refute the irrational belief.

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