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[Home](#) > Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive Distortions

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Cognitive distortions are thought patterns that are unhelpful to you. These are thought that pass through our minds so quickly, that we don't even notice them unless we make an effort. More importantly, their cognitive distortions do not correspond with reality.

Even though we don't necessarily always realize this, we spend all of our waking hours thinking, even if it is against our will. The mind forms millions of thoughts a day and those thoughts, in turn, dictate behavior. However, in the case of cognitive distortions, those thoughts are negative and not based on reality, so they keep us stuck in a loop of negative emotions and behaviors.

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Thoughts and Emotions Lead to Behavior

Every emotion that we have is always predetermined by a set of thoughts. As is the premise of cognitive behavioral therapy, what we think and feel, greatly influences our behaviors, as well as the other way around. After all, that's what the technique of Stimulus Control is all about; changing our habits implies changing our behavior and that gives us the opportunity to reprogram ourselves through more positive feelings and thoughts.

External and Internal Influencers

So far, if you've been following the provided tips and have internalized the newly acquired information, you've already made some changes.

You are now aware of the importance of controlling external factors in your bedroom, such as light, sounds, temperature, and know when and how to use your bedroom properly. That is a positive step towards getting back on track with healthy sleeping practices.

But, it is highly likely that internal factors are also playing a role in your specific sleep disorder, as they do for most people. Negative emotions and thoughts may be fueling your sleepless nights.

The Venus Flytrap of Thoughts

For example, an unhelpful train of thought would go something like this:

"Can't sleep...I might as well gaze at the ceiling in defeat since I obviously won't get any sleep at all tonight... I wish there were something I could do about it because tomorrow I'll be exhausted and useless."

After being influenced by several similar thoughts, who could feel relaxed or fall asleep?! Cognitive distortions are like a Venus flytrap for thoughts - your mind misperceives it as a fact, when, in fact, it is a negative and unrealistic illusion.

Types of Cognitive Distortion

Getting to know the types of cognitive distortions and identifying which one(s) you may be entrapped by, is an excellent way to handle the internal factors that affect your sleep.

Now let's have an overview of the most common unhelpful thinking styles:

Black and White thinking.

It's easy to see how this is unhelpful. Life is full of shades, between black and white. Absolutes almost never happen in real-life scenarios.

Examples:

- "I didn't reach this one goal because I'm a failure"
- "He's a bad person because of what he said"

Filtering

This refers to filtering out the positive and focusing on the negative. It's when we choose to focus on the negatives around us, or about us, as some evidence to prove that there are no possible good outcomes.

Examples:

- "I don't think I'll be able to finish this course, just like that time I didn't finish that class"

- "Sure, it may be helpful to learn all of this, but it's too much work, and I am not sure I can even commit"

Jumping to Conclusions

This one is somewhat self-explanatory. We may believe to know what others are thinking, or why they have taken certain actions as if we are mind readers. This can lead to some very false conclusions.

Examples:

- "No way this will work"
- "She didn't call when she promised - she must be trying to ignore me"

Overgeneralizing

Our minds sometimes see a pattern where there is none, just by basing it on one or two previous occasions.

Examples:

- "I never..."
- "You always..."

Emotional Reasoning

You reason based only on your feelings.

Example:

- "I'm nervous, so something bad is going to happen".

Blaming

Labeling and blame tend to have negative connotations and make us overlook important qualities in ourselves and others. Blaming can be directed towards external circumstances, ourselves, as well as others.

Example:

- "It's my fault because I'm a jerk"
- "I could have given a great answer if she hadn't interrupted me"
- "It's not my fault that I react so strongly – I am just a naturally nervous person"
- "I am unhappy because my boyfriend doesn't pay enough attention to me"

Fallacies of Fairness and Reward

Some of us tend to measure life, events, and other people's actions regarding how fair they are towards us. This is also linked to the fallacy of reward – having done something good, does not necessarily mean that we will be rewarded for it. Anticipating fairness and reward may easily lead to bitterness and stand in the way of perceiving the objective reality.

Example:

- “My colleague doesn't do as much work as me, yet she receives a bigger salary, that's so unfair!”
- “I don't deserve this, I have always been a good person!”

Catastrophizing

It can sometimes be unbelievably easy to turn a small problem, into a huge disaster.

Example:

- “That word I typed in the text message is probably going to make a huge impression on him, he is going to think that I am an idiot, and everything will be ruined!”

Personalization

This cognitive distortion refers to our tendency to attribute events, as well as other people's behavior to ourselves, even when we might have had nothing to do with it.

Examples:

- “Those two people were whispering while I was giving my presentation – they must have been making fun of me”
- “My boss seems angry today – I guess it is because my report must have been poorly done”

Does It Apply to You?

As you read through the examples of cognitive distortions, it may be tempting to say that this is not you and has never happened to you. However, the fact is that most people have experienced the greater part of the cognitive distortions, at least once or twice in their lives. It is important to remember that these are not conscious processes, and so you don't necessarily realize you are having those thoughts. Still, they do affect your emotions and behavior.

Now that you know what cognitive distortions are, you have looked the enemy in the eye and have prepared yourself to take purposeful, deliberate actions, to help yourself.

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