How Thoughts Drive Fear

Thoughts have a substantial impact on how we feel and behave. They influence the way we deal with certain situations, how we perceive the world and interpret important events in our lives. We may or may not be aware of these thoughts, but it is important to explore them and uncover those that make public speaking hard for us.

As we grow up and develops as individuals, we adopt certain patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behavior. These thoughts may exist in the form of cognitive distortions - biased ways of thinking about ourselves and the world.

Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions or irrational thoughts and beliefs can cause maladaptive emotional states and behavior. In the context of public speaking, cognitive distortions may lead us to experience anxiety, excessive fear of public speaking, and avoidance, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety disorders. All of these have detrimental effects on a person's overall health and wellbeing.

Why Change Them?

The first step of turning maladaptive cognitive patterns into flexible and adaptive ones is to

become aware of them. By doing so, we can make our thinking more objective and rational. Furthermore, addressing your cognitive distortions in a systematic and structured way will inevitably lead to more flexible and fulfilling emotional, as well as behavioral experiences.

Let's first focus on the list of the most common cognitive distortions, and then we'll examine the way to identify these which may be at the base of your fear of public speaking.

The Most Common Cognitive Distortions

- **All-or-nothing thinking** - Refers to seeing things either as black or white. For example, if your public speech isn't perfect, you perceive it as a total failure.

- **Overgeneralization** - One negative event you see as a fixed pattern that will follow you through all future events; a relatively insignificant event may be transformed into a sweeping generalization. For instance, "I was felt anxious before my speech, so that must mean that I will never be able to speak in public."

- **Labeling and Mislabeling** - This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. For example, when your public speech isn't perfect, not only that you see it as a failure, but you label yourself as a loser. Mislabeling includes the use of language that is very saturated with emotions, especially negative ones.

- **Mind Reading** - A form of jumping to conclusions, in which you conclude that someone thinks in a certain way, without making sure you have evidence, or considering other options. For instance, one may conclude that his colleagues are disinterested in his speech, when they didn't specifically say so or show it in any way.

- **Catastrophizing** - Revolves around expecting a disaster to happen. It has forms of magnifying or minimizing. For example, you are convinced that your public speech will be disastrous, so you are magnifying its importance and impact on your entire life, and minimizing your other qualities and positive experiences.

- **Personalization** - This cognitive distortion refers to seeing yourself as the cause of the negative behaviors, thought and emotions that others have while, in reality, there may be more realistic explanations. For instance, your boss's face may be sour while you present, which may cause you to believe that he dislikes his presentation, while he may simply be having a headache.

- **Imperative Statements** - These include "should" and "must" beliefs and are an excellent way to make yourself and others feel guilty, even if there's no reason. They include all the things you firmly believe you should, must or ought to do or accomplish: "I have got to be funnier, while presenting". They can be directed toward other people, too. For example: "People must respect me" is one of these. Emotional consequences are

anger and frustration, whenever people aren't responding to your demands.

- **Emotional Reasoning** - Refers to the assumption that your negative emotions are a realistic reflection of the current circumstances or the future. For example, "If I feel nervous about my public speech, therefore it is going to be a disaster".

- **Disqualifying the Positive** – Although positive occurrences do indeed exist in your life, you may tend to ignore them or write them off as being caused by external factors. For instance, you may consider those times when everyone has thoroughly enjoyed your speeches, to be flukes or lucky coincidences.

- **Magnification/Minimization** – Refers to the tendency to magnify the negatives of yourself/a situation/others and minimize the positive aspects. For example, "Sally said that everyone loved my speech, but I they didn't clap that much and how could anyone enjoy listening to someone like me, who makes mistakes all the time."

- **Mental Filter** – Concentrating on one small, negative detail, rather than other, positive aspects of the situation. For example, people may have clapped very hard after your speech, asked thoughtful questions, and congratulated you after, but all that matters to you may be that you stuttered ones, during the speech, out of nervousness.

- **Tunnel Vision** – Refers to a tendency of going down a spiral of negativity, by only seeing what is bad about yourself/others/the circumstances. For example, "My colleagues are terrible listeners, the topic I have to present I dull, and I always sweat so much when I present."

Identify Your Cognitive Distortions

The first step in identifying your cognitive distortions is to write down your feelings, thoughts and cognitive distortions related to public speaking. For that purpose you can use this worksheet:

FEELINGS:	THOUGHTS:

In the first column, you should write down your feelings, including physical and emotional experiences.
In the second column, you should focus on thoughts accompanied with the feelings from the first column.

Think about the examples that were included in the list of cognitive distortions. Those are the

sort of thought you need to search for, within your mind.

In the third column, try to analyze your thoughts, and decide whether they are rational, based on real evidence, as well as positive and helpful, or irrational. Try to name the cognitive distortions, using the list provided above.

Fill in as many columns as you can.

Example

FEELINGS:	THOUGHTS:
Afraid, tense, nervous stomach, damp palms	"I'm so nervous that I'm going to say someth
Dizziness, low confidence, fear, tingling in the arms	"My mind will go blank and I'll look like an idi
Restlessness and heightened alertness	"I think I forgot to rehearse the last part of m presentation. I should do it now."

Once you have identified your feelings, try to recognize the thoughts that might usually lead to certain distortions. This can give you an insight into the way your thoughts and feelings are interconnected and help you to start seeing the patterns in your behavior.

Remember that the goal of this exercise isn't to delete any feelings, because that's not possible or necessary. Emotions are a natural part of human experience and are a part of what makes you an interesting person.

However, you can do a lot with the negative thoughts and distortions, once you've identified them. You are about to learn how to do that next.

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