

Coping Skills Seminars

Challenging Thinking Handout

Patterns of Cognitive Distortions (Thinking Errors)

Adapted from David Burns (<https://feelinggood.com/>).

These are 10 common cognitive distortions that can contribute to negative emotions. Read these and identify ones that are familiar to you.

All-or-nothing thinking

You see things in black and white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure. For example, a straight A student who receives a B on an exam, concludes “Now I’m a total failure.”

Often Sometimes Never

Overgeneralization

You see a single negative event as a never ending pattern of defeat. For example, you ask someone on a date and they decline, you conclude “I’m never going to get a date. No one will ever want me.”

Often Sometimes Never

Mental filter

You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolours an entire beaker of water. For example, in a 20 minute oral presentation, for 2 minutes you lose your concentration and you feel you rambling. Because of this you think, “I gave a horrible presentation,” discounting that for 18 of the 20 minutes you performed well.

Often Sometimes Never

Disqualifying the positive

You transform neutral or even positive experiences into negative ones. You reject positive experiences by insisting that they “don’t count” for some reason or the other. In this way you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences. For example, someone praises your appearance or your work, you tell yourself, “They’re just being nice” or you say to them, “It was nothing really.”

Often Sometimes Never

Personalization

You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event which in fact you were not primarily responsible for. It causes you to feel extremely guilty. For example, a father sees his child’s report card with a note from the teach indicating the child isn’t working well. He immediately replies, “I must be a bad father. This shows how I’ve failed.”

Often Sometimes Never

Should statements

You try to motivate yourself with should and shouldn'ts as if you have to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. Musts and oughts are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements at others you feel anger, frustration, and resentment. For example, "I should have gotten all the questions right," causes feelings of guilt. "He should have been on time," causes feelings of resentment, anger, and frustration.

Often Sometimes Never

Jumping to conclusions

You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.

- a. Mind reading: You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you and you don't bother to check it out. For example, your partner is upset about school and is quiet while you're hanging out. You think, "S/he's mad at me. What did I do wrong?"
- b. Fortune teller error: You anticipate things will turn out badly and feel convinced that your prediction is an already established fact. For example, you call a friend who doesn't get back to you. You don't call back because you think "S/he'll think I'm being obnoxious if I call again. I'll make a fool of myself." You avoid your friend, feel put down and later find out s/he never got your message.

Often Sometimes Never

Magnification (catastrophizing) or minimization

You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your mistakes or someone else's achievement), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other person's imperfections). For example (magnification), you answer a professor's question incorrectly and think, "How awful. Now he thinks I'm stupid and I'll fail this class, never graduate and never get a good job."

Often Sometimes Never

Emotional reasoning

You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are. "I feel it, therefore it must be true." For example, "I feel stupid, therefore I am stupid." "I feel overwhelmed and hopeless, therefore my problems must be impossible to solve."

Often Sometimes Never

Labeling and mislabeling

An extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself. When someone else's behavior rubs you the wrong way, you

attach a negative label to that person. Mislabeled involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded. For example, you miss a basketball shot and say, "I'm a loser" instead of saying, "I messed up on that one shot."

Often Sometimes Never

Thought record example one

Situation/trigger

What happened? Where? When? Who with? How?

Example: Yesterday afternoon my roommate (Chris) confronted me while I was in the kitchen making a snack. He said that I wasn't keeping up with my chores and that everyone in the house is fed up with me.

Your example:

Mood/feelings

List and Rate from 0-100

Example: Anxious – 90%, Angry – 40%, Guilty – 50%, Sad - 60%

Your example:

Automatic thoughts

What went through my mind right before I started to feel this way? Circle the 'hot' thought.

Example: Everyone in the house hates me. I'll have to move out. It's my fault things are so stressful in the house. I'm a loser. I never do anything right.

Your example:

What disturbed me? What did those thoughts/images/memories mean to me, or say about me/the situation? What am I responding to? What 'button' is this pressing for me? What would be the worst thing about that, or that could happen?

Evidence that does support the thought

What facts do I have that the hot thought is true?

Example: I haven't been on top of my chores for the past week. Chris said the other roommates are fed up. Pat hasn't responded to any of my texts or voicemails today. Andy ignored me when I said hello in SLC.

Your example:

Evidence that does not support the thought

What facts do I have that the hot thought is not totally true?

Example: No one else has said anything to me about the chores. Alex asked me this morning if I want to hang out tonight. Avery was friendly when we were both making dinner last night. Chris confronted Andy about the chores a few weeks ago and said pretty much the same thing.

Your example:

What would you say to someone else who thought this? What would your best friend say about this thought? What about when you're in a different mood/situation, how do you think about it then? How did you think about this in the past? How will you in the future? Is it possible that this is opinion, rather than fact? What have others said about this?

Alternative thought

What thought balances the evidence and provides realistic perspective?

Example: They might be annoyed that I wasn't keeping up with my chores, but no one else has said or done anything that shows they hate me.

Your example:

What would someone else say about this situation? What advice would you give someone else? Is this really as important as it seems? What can you say to yourself that will be self-enhancing instead of self-deprecating? How can you restate this situation in new terms? How would you like to act and feel in the situation? What can you say to yourself to help you do this?

Outcome

Re-rate your mood/feelings

Example: Anxious – 60%

Thought record example two

Situation/trigger

What happened? Where? When? Who with? How?

Example: Last night I was watching TV and started thinking about all my friends back home and started feeling homesick.

Your example:

Mood/feelings

List and Rate from 0-100

Example: Sad - 90%, lonely – 80%

Your example:

Automatic thoughts

What went through my mind right before I started to feel this way? Circle the 'hot' thought.

Example: I'll never make friends here. No one here likes me. I'll never make it in university. I'll have to drop out and go home.

Your example:

What disturbed me? What did those thoughts/images/memories mean to me, or say about me/the situation? What am I responding to? What 'button' is this pressing for me? What would be the worst thing about that, or that could happen?

Evidence that does support the thought

What facts do I have that the hot thought is true?

Example: I've been here for weeks already and still don't have anyone to hang out with.

Your example:

Evidence that does not support the thought

What facts do I have that the hot thought is not totally true?

Example: A lot of people get homesick and make it through. I was homesick when I went to camp for the summer, but I was ok after a bit. I usually have trouble making friends at first, but I always end up with friends. That girl in my night class asked if I wanted to get together before class next week for coffee.

Your example:

What would you say to someone else who thought this? What would your best friend say about this thought? What about when you're in a different mood/situation, how do you think about it then? How did you think about this in the past? How will you in the future? Is it possible that this is opinion, rather than fact? What have others said about this?

Alternative thought

What thought balances the evidence and provides realistic perspective?

Example: I feel lonely now, but the feeling is temporary and I will adjust and make friends.

Your example:

What would someone else say about this situation? What advice would you give someone else? Is this really as important as it seems? What can you say to yourself that will be self-enhancing instead of self-deprecating? How can you restate this situation in new terms? How would you like to act and feel in the situation? What can you say to yourself to help you do this?

Outcome

Re-rate your mood/feelings

Example: Sad – 50%

Your example:

Relaxation Strategy: Meditation

Leaves On A Stream

With your mind's eye, take a moment to imagine a stream.

This stream may be in the woods, running through a wide pasture, coming down the mountain or elsewhere in nature.

It may be one you've seen in real life or creation of your imagination.

Next imagine there are leaves floating on the stream.

These leaves are like the contents of your mind (your feelings, thoughts, body sensations, memories, dreams, wishes, longings).

Stay focused on observing... Simply notice the leaves, the thought, the feeling, the sensation, and then let them go.

Observe the leaves floating by, noting that they are there... Notice their shape and size...

Observe their presence as they float through your conscious awareness.

Notice how quickly they flow out of your awareness.

You acknowledge it... Let yourself know it's there... That's enough and that's all that's needed...

It can float on down the stream and out of your awareness.

If a thought pops into your consciousness, notice it and then allow it to float past.

Stay focused in your observing self, allowing the leaves to float past, knowing that thoughts and feelings are present, and that you do not have to do anything with them.

You can look at the other side of the stream, watch a tree, a bird or butterfly, or just let your mind be clear, and allow the stream to keep on flowing.