

Common Unhelpful Thinking Patterns

Unhelpful thinking patterns, also called cognitive distortions, reflect ways that thoughts can become biased. As conscious beings, humans are always interpreting the world around them and trying to make sense of what is happening. Sometimes the brain takes 'short cuts' and generates results that are not completely accurate. Different cognitive short cuts result in different kinds of bias or distortions in thinking, and having the same type of distortion repeatedly can negatively affect our emotions and actions.

Below are the most common types of unhelpful thinking patterns:

1. All-or-nothing thinking: Believing that something or someone can only be good or bad, right or wrong, rather than anything in between or shades of gray.

Example: *"I didn't do the assignment perfectly, so I'm a failure."*

2. Catastrophizing: Imagining and believing that the worst possible thing will happen.

Example: *"Oh no, that's my boss calling. I hope I'm not getting fired for doing something wrong."*

3. Personalizing: Relating external events to oneself when there is no basis for making such a connection, or concluding without factual evidence that what happened was your fault even when you were not responsible.

Example: *"If I had just stayed up all night, then I could have made sure my friend didn't sleep through her alarm and miss her exam."*

4. Magnifying: Blowing something out of proportion.

Example: *"My husband didn't thank me for cleaning his work shirts. He obviously doesn't appreciate me."*

5. Minimizing: Inappropriately shrinking something to make it seem less important.

Example: *"I was praised at work today for saving some important documents, but it's no big deal, anyone could have done it."*

6. Mental filter: Tendency to focus on one detail, often taken out of context, and ignoring other more important parts of an experience. This often results in focusing only on the negative aspects of a situation.

Example: *"Sure my friend invited me along on the group camping trip, but she didn't ask me first, so she must not really want me there."*

7. Jumping to conclusions: Arbitrarily jumping to a negative conclusion due to 'fortunetelling' and 'mind reading' that is not justified by the facts.

- **The fortunetelling variant:** Imagining and predicting that bad things will happen to you.
Example: *"I just know I'm going to slip on the stage and humiliate myself when I get my award."*
- **The mind reading variant:** Assuming that other people are thinking negatively about you.
Example: *"The way she looked at me makes me sure she thinks I look fat in my dress."*

8. Labeling/mislabeling: Assigning global labels to oneself or others.

Example: *"I am stupid." Or towards others it might be, "That guy is a genius."*

9. Overgeneralizing: Drawing a general conclusion about abilities, performance, or worth on the basis of a single incident. This commonly leads to assuming a negative outcome for similar things before engaging in them.

Example: *"I failed the math test, therefore I'll never be able to do a degree that requires math."*

10. Emotional reasoning: Assuming that your emotions logically and factually reflect reality.

Example: *"I feel anxious, therefore this situation must be dangerous."*

11. "Should" statements: Using words such as "should", "must" or "have to" to impose unrealistic expectations on oneself or others and feeling guilt, frustration or resentment when the "rules" are broken.

Example: *"I should have been better prepared"*