
Don't Let Your Brain Trick You

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“If you don't like something, change it; if you can't change it,
change the way you think about it.”

~Mary Engelbreit

Cognitive distortions, while a natural function of the brain, can be at the root of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, being overly critical or judgmental (leading to conflicts in relationships), and even the desire to dissociate and self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs. Survival is a primary focus for the human body, so our minds are often alert to potential danger in our environment. For many people, and certainly for our culture as a whole, this leads to mindsets full of fear, anxiety, and “preparing for the worst.” In the practice of law, these mindsets can help us prepare for a case, but in our personal lives these negative messages affect our moods and behaviors. There are several cognitive distortions, but these are among the most common. Do any of them look familiar to you? Which ones do you experience? Which ones do you observe others experiencing?



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1. **Filtering** – focusing only the negative in a way that contaminates the good. For example, buying a new home but focusing only on the increase in your mortgage and taxes.
 2. **Jumping to conclusions** – presuming the thoughts or motivations of others or looking pessimistically into the future. For example, if someone cuts you off in traffic, believing the driver is doing it just to upset you.
 3. **Emotional reasoning** – allowing your emotions to cloud your concept of reality. For example, allowing an overly-critical friend or co-worker to make you feel unlovable or worthless.
 4. **Labeling** – turning to labels rather than acknowledging complexities. For example, believing that if you forget to send a birthday card to a friend, you are a bad friend.
 5. **Personalization** – holding yourself responsible for negative events that aren't completely within your control. For example, believing that if you had said or done something differently, the settlement would have been better.
 6. **“Should” statements** – using language such as “should,” “must,” or “ought to” to define the “proper path.” For example, if you fail to live up to your rigid beliefs or expectations, you feel guilty or lacking; and, if others fail to live up to the same beliefs, there is something wrong with them.
 7. **Magnification or minimization** – the importance of things is exaggerated to the point of catastrophe, or positive qualities and achievements shrink to insignificance in comparison to others. For example, you had great legal successes, but they seem overshadowed when someone else in the firm has a success.
 8. **All-or-nothing thinking** – overlooking nuances and evaluating the world in black and white. For example, even if something you are doing succeeds on many levels, because one element goes wrong, you see the entire project as a failure.
 9. **Overgeneralization** – rather than judging events on their own merits, you see them as proof of a broader pattern, i.e. self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, if you aren't invited to a party, you believe it's a sign that “no one likes you.”
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10. Disqualifying the positive – believing that the good things around or within you don't count. For example, if someone gives you a compliment, you find yourself giving excuses and explaining why it is not really deserved.

While these are common cognitive distortions, we don't have to succumb to them. Think about which ones you practice on a daily basis. Contemplate why you might think that way, and how it effects your moods and your relationships. Cognitive distortions exist, in part, because our minds become alert to potential danger around us. This hypervigilance can lead to simplifying information in a negative way. And, because emotions are addictive, we become addicted to the negative feelings that are associated with our cognitive distortions. Thinking in a cognitively distorted way does not benefit us; rather, it leads to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and relationship problems.

There are several simple steps we can take in order to think in more realistic, healthy, rational, and "less neurotic" ways. The best way to conquer cognitive distortions is to become aware of them, and question them. Build an awareness of the type and style of your distortions. Do you habitually look for the negative in a situation? Do you think in black-and white, all-or-nothing terms? Do you think in "always-never" extremes? When we become aware of the style or tendency of our thought patterns, we can make changes. One way to make changes is to question the thought. Ask yourself:

- Is there really only one way to see this situation? Can I put myself in the other person's shoes and see it from a different perspective?
- Could I identify at least one positive aspect to this or find some humor in the situation?
- Is it true that it is an "always-never" circumstance?
- Am I allowing my emotional state to cloud my ability to reason?
- Am I placing undue blame on myself or someone else for a circumstance?
- Am I making "a mountain out of a molehill" or "blowing things out of proportion?"
- Am I basing my thoughts on evidence, or jumping to conclusions?
- Could I be misjudging or misinterpreting the situation?

If your thinking was based on a cognitive distortion, don't be hard on yourself; that just leads to more cognitive distortions! Laugh it off, or find it interesting or curious; then question where it came from. Ask yourself, "Why would I choose to think about the situation in that way?" Then create a thought or opinion about the situation that is based in reality and takes more than one possibility into account. The practice of law encourages certain cognitive distortions because attorneys must be hypervigilant on behalf of their client or throughout a case; however, that does not mean you have to practice cognitive distortions when you aren't practicing law. Mindfully take off your "attorney hat" when you are driving, going to the grocery store, at home with friends or family, or relaxing on vacation. Attorneys think and problem solve for a living; be sure that the way you think is healthy and rational, not neurotic or distorted! ●

Sarah Myers, Esq., LMFT, LAC, is the Executive Director of the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). COLAP is the free, confidential and independent well-being program for the legal community of Colorado. For more information, go to www.coloradolap.org. For a confidential consultation, discussion about your stressors, or to obtain helpful resources, contact COLAP at 303-986-3345 or info@coloradolap.org.