

Cognitive Distortions for Kids

When our kids are feeling really worried, sad, angry, or overwhelmed, sometimes their brains can get stuck in certain “modes,” or ways of thinking. These are ways of thinking that aren’t *actually* true, but *feel* true in the moment. For example, if your child makes one mistake, their brain might go into All-or-Nothing Mode and think, “I’m bad at everything,” even though that is not true. When we help them name these modes, it can be easier to help them see a situation from a new perspective. Here are six common modes and some examples of what they sound like.

Fortune Teller Mode

Our brains are in fortune teller mode when they predict that the *worst* possible outcomes are going to happen in the future. This is also called “catastrophizing.”

I think I failed my math test today. I’m probably going to flunk for the rest of the year. What if I have to repeat the whole grade?!



Mind Reader Mode

Our brains are in mind reader mode when they take guesses at what other people are thinking. However, our brains feel *really sure* that their guesses are right.

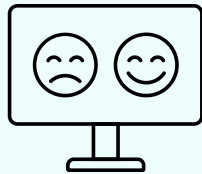
My first day at my new school was awkward. I bet the other kids think I’m shy and weird. I bet none of them want to be friends.



All-or-Nothing Mode

Our brains are in all-or-nothing mode when they only see things in extremes. This is also called “black and white thinking.”

If this audition doesn’t go well, then I’ll be a total failure at dance. It doesn’t matter that I was good at dance in the past.



All My Fault Mode

Our brains are in all my fault mode when they are *sure* something is all our fault, even if that’s not really true.

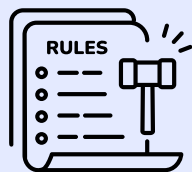
I missed my friend’s text when he was upset. If I had answered, he would have felt better. So it’s my fault that he had a bad day.



I Should / I Must Mode

Our brains are in I should / I must mode when it seems like there are rigid rules about how you are always supposed to behave, with no room for mistakes.

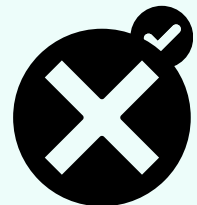
I can’t believe I dropped that pass. I should always give 100 percent. I can’t ever make a mistake.



Ignoring the Positive Mode

Our brains are in ignoring the positive mode when a mix of good, bad, and neutral things happen, but only the bad things seem to matter.

My grades just got posted. It’s not important that I got my grade up in Science - my grade in Social Studies is still low.



*This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.



Cognitive Distortions for Kids

To help you or your child become more familiar with this, draw a line to match the examples to each mode.

To be a good friend, I always have to be fun. I can't ever be in a bad mood.

1

It doesn't matter that I got chosen for a part in the play. I didn't get the lead role.

2

My classmate got in trouble. He must be a really bad person.

3

She didn't laugh at my joke. She doesn't think I'm funny at all.

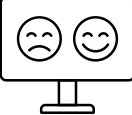
4


My teacher punished the whole class, but it's probably because I was too loud.


5

I haven't made any friends yet. I'll never make friends in my whole life.

6


A  **All-or-Nothing Mode**
Black and white; no room for gray

B  **Mind Reader Mode**
"Knowing" what someone is thinking

C  **Ignoring the Positive Mode**
When only bad things seem to matter

D  **Fortune Teller Mode**
Predicting the worst future outcome

E  **All My Fault Mode**
Being sure something is your fault

F  **I Should / I Must Mode**
Rigid rules about what you have to do

Answers: 1=F, 2=C, 3=A, 4=B, 5=E, 6=D

Is your child experiencing a cognitive distortion? Write down their thought below:

.....

.....

Which cognitive distortion does the thought match? Why?

.....

.....

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Cognitive Distortions for Kids

If your child is experiencing a cognitive distortion, you can help them practice looking at a situation in a new way. Use the ideas and examples below to try a new perspective.

Ask, what would you say if your best friend said this?

Focus on what you know in the present moment

Get more flexible by brainstorming “maybe”s

Balance the positives and negatives with “and”

Mind Reader Mode “Knowing” what someone is thinking	<i>She didn't laugh at my joke. She doesn't think I'm funny at all.</i>	→	<i>Maybe she didn't like that joke or she's heard it before. Maybe she has a different sense of humor from mine.</i>
Ignoring the Positive Mode When only bad things seem to matter	<i>It doesn't matter that I got chosen for a part in the play. I didn't get the lead role.</i>	→	<i>I didn't get the lead in the play - AND - I was the first choice for the role I did get.</i>
Fortune Teller Mode Predicting the worst future outcome	<i>I haven't made any friends yet. I'll never make friends in my whole life.</i>	→	<i>Right now, I'm still working on making friends. I'm going to keep trying.</i>
All My Fault Mode Being sure something is your fault	<i>My teacher punished the whole class, but it's probably because I was too loud.</i>	→	<i>You probably weren't the only person being loud if the whole class got in trouble.</i>
I Should / I Must Mode Rigid rules about what you have to do	<i>To be a good friend, I always have to be fun. I can't ever be in a bad mood.</i>	→	<i>Everybody gets into a bad mood sometimes. That doesn't mean you're a bad friend, just human!</i>
All or Nothing Mode Black and white; no room for gray	<i>My classmate got in trouble. He must be a really bad person.</i>	→	<i>Maybe he was just having a bad day. Maybe good kids can make mistakes. Maybe the teacher was being unfair.</i>

With your child, try writing a new, more balanced thought to replace their distorted thought:

.....

.....

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Additional Resources to Support Your Mental Health Journey

It can be hard to know where to begin looking for support in your mental health journey. Getting a referral from a primary care physician is a reliable first step. Also, sometimes family and friends have experienced similar issues and have professionals they would recommend. The experts at ChoosingTherapy.com are here to help as well, with resources we have reviewed and recommend. Our [strict editorial standards](#) ensure our reviews are fair, honest, thorough, and based on firsthand experience.

You Can Trust ChoosingTherapy.com



325+
Companies Reviewed



3,625+
Hours of Firsthand Experience



1,545+
Data Points Analyzed



[Best Online Therapy](#)

Online therapy is a convenient way to connect with a licensed therapist to address mental health issues, reduce unhealthy behaviors, develop effective coping skills, and get more satisfaction out of life. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.

[Best Online Psychiatry](#)

Online psychiatry providers enable patients to consult with licensed psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. They can evaluate, diagnose, and prescribe medication to help manage mental health issues. Many companies accept insurance and most have next-day appointments available.



[Best Mental Health Apps](#)

Apps can be great way to monitor mood, track sleep, journal, and practice healthy coping skills like mindfulness and meditation. There are apps specifically designed to help people reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD, chronic stress, and burnout.

[Therapist Directory](#)

When you're looking for a mental health provider with a very particular skill set, level of experience, or personality type, a therapist directory can be very helpful. Using the filters, you can refine your search until you find a therapist who feels like a perfect fit.

