

Cognitive Distortions

When we are feeling very sad, worried, or upset, sometimes our 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 you make one mistake, your brain might distort the meaning of this mistake and see it as evidence of “always” making mistakes and getting things wrong. When we can name cognitive distortions, it can be easier to pause and look at a situation from a new perspective. Here are six common distortion “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 presentation at work today. I just know I’m going to get fired soon. What if I can’t ever find a job like this again?!



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.

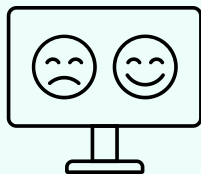
Meeting new people at that party was awkward. I bet everyone was judging me. I can’t believe they’re all so stuck up.



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.”

Everyone else is so active on the weekends. Sure, I’ll walk the dog, but that doesn’t count. I guess I’m just lazy.



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, I could have talked him through it. It’s my fault he’s feeling down.



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.

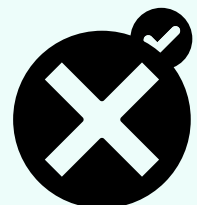
I can’t believe I dropped that pass. I should always give 100 percent. There’s no excuse, I should be better than that.



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.

Things have been going well with my new girlfriend, but she canceled our date for tomorrow. She doesn’t care about me.



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



Cognitive Distortions

To get more familiar with these concepts, draw a line to match the examples to each mode.

To be a good friend, I always have to be available. I can't miss anything.

1

It doesn't matter that I was chosen for the new project. I'm not the team lead.

2

My coworker got written up at work. He must be a really bad person.

3

She didn't laugh at my joke. She must hate my sense of humor.

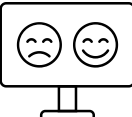
4


I was polite, but he was so mad when I said no. Maybe I should have been nicer.

5

I haven't dated anyone in so long. I'll probably never find a partner.

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=F, 3=C, 4=A, 5=B, 6=D

Are you experiencing a cognitive distortion? Write down your thought below.

.....

.....

Which cognitive distortion does the thought match? Why?

.....

.....



Cognitive Distortions

If you are experiencing a cognitive distortion, you can 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 must hate my sense of humor.</i>	→	<i>Maybe she didn't like that joke or she's heard it before. Maybe she just 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 was chosen for the new project. I'm not the team lead.</i>	→	<i>I wasn't chosen for the team lead - AND - I was chosen to be on the project and it was competitive.</i>
Fortune Teller Mode Predicting the worst future outcome	<i>I haven't dated anyone in so long. I'll probably never find a partner.</i>	→	<i>If I want to date someone, I can put myself out there. I'll keep trying.</i>
All My Fault Mode Being sure something is your fault	<i>I was polite, but he was so mad when I said no. Maybe I should have been nicer.</i>	→	<i>His feelings are his responsibility. Being polite but firm is totally okay.</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 available. I can't miss anything.</i>	→	<i>Everybody misses things 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 coworker got written up at work. He must be a really bad person.</i>	→	<i>Maybe he was just having a bad day. Maybe people make mistakes. Maybe management was being unfair.</i>

Try writing a new, more balanced thought to replace your distorted thought:





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.

