

Identifying Cognitive Distortions

This thought record is a cognitive restructuring technique that encourages balanced thinking as you identify cognitive biases, errors, or unhelpful thinking. First, write down the date and time when the thought occurred. What were you thinking about when you started to feel distressed? Describe the situation and write down the automatic thought you had. If you had several thoughts or images come to mind, work on one at a time. Record your emotion(s) and include the intensity. Then, identify whether an unhelpful thinking style was involved (*see brief descriptions, below*). Write an alternative to the original automatic thought. In the final column record the outcome, which may be a change in emotional state or the choice to behave in a different way. You may need to use an additional piece of paper if you require more space.

Sometimes you see the world accurately, but often your mind takes “short cuts,” and your thinking is biased. These unhelpful thinking styles (*cognitive distortions*) can affect how you feel. Unhelpful thinking styles include:

- **All-or-nothing thinking** describes thinking or acting in extremes or evaluating qualities in black-or-white categories.
- **Overgeneralization** describes seeing patterns based on too little data.
- **Mental filter or selective abstraction** refers to only paying attention to certain types of evidence and focusing on details taken out of context.
- **Disqualifying the positive** describes the process of dismissing positive information.
- **Jumping to conclusions** refers to coming to a negative conclusion that is not justified by the facts.
- **Fortune telling** describes imagining and predicting that bad things will happen.
- **Mind reading** assumes other people are thinking negatively about you.
- **Magnification and minimization** describe how you may exaggerate imperfections and errors while minimizing achievements and strengths.
- **Emotional reasoning** describes the process of assuming your emotions are evidence of truth.
- **“Should” statements** reflect sometimes unreasonable standards and can lead to feelings of frustration, shame, or guilt.
- **Labelling and mislabelling** describe the process of “summing up” yourself or others by tagging, such as, “I am stupid,” or “He is such a coward!”
- **Personalization and blame** describe situations when you conclude that what happened was your fault even when you were not responsible.

