

## Is Your Thinking Distorted?

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The way you think influences who you are. Although this may seem obvious, let me break this down to show the importance of this idea in your life. How you think about something (thoughts) affects how you feel (emotions) which in turn affects how you act (behavior). How you act then, affects how you think and feel. Can you see the cycle?

Thinking → feeling → behaving → thinking → feeling → etc.

For example, when I think I am a bad teacher (**thought**) I feel sad and discouraged (**feelings**) I teach with less enthusiasm and passion (**behavior**) I receive poor evaluations and then I really **believe I am a bad teacher (thought)** and the cycle continues downward.

So what does distorted in “distorted thinking” mean anyway? Distorted means inaccurate, irrational, not quite right, false, not completely true, or that there is an error of some sort. When it comes to distorted thinking, all of these definitions will work. When you feel really upset, anxious, angry, scared, ashamed or any other intense emotion it is likely that your thinking is not quite right or distorted.

One way to feel better is to first identify what thoughts are causing your emotions and then to check to see if any of these thoughts have errors or distortions in them. By finding the mistakes in your thinking you begin to see that your thoughts are not entirely true. This can greatly reduce the emotion that it was causing, since you no longer believe the upsetting thought. For instance, when I feel anxious sometimes I think people will *see* I am anxious and that they will *think* that I am weak. This thought causes me sadness, shame, and more anxiety. If I look for distortions or errors in this thought I will see that there are many; fortune telling, mind reading, and labeling to name just a few (see list of distortions on the next page). Do I really know that people can see my anxiety or that they will always think badly about me because I appear anxious? I am also labeling myself as weak, but if I feel anxious is that enough information to conclude that I am a weak human being or less than someone who isn't feeling anxious?

By finding these distortions I show myself that my upsetting thought is not entirely true which results in less sadness, shame, and anxiety. You may be thinking that this is too simple to make any difference (fortune telling), but in reality this can be a powerful tool to help you feel better. Please review the following page: Common Distorted Thought Patterns and see if you can spot any errors that you have in your thinking. Let's find out whether this works for you!

## **Common Distorted Thought Patterns**

I have written the following based on my experience with cognitive therapy and having read numerous books that describe thinking errors, mistakes, or cognitive distortions. Although these are my own words, these general ideas are borrowed from much greater minds.

### **Mind Reading:**

You automatically assume what others are thinking or feeling. Even if you have good reasons to believe you are correct, you are often wrong. “She’s angry with me” “They think I’m boring” “He’s disappointed in me” etc.

### **Fortune Telling:**

You predict the future in mostly negative ways. Last time I checked, no one can predict the future with 100% certainty. See this quote by Winston Churchill: "When I look back on all these worries I remember the story of the old man who said on his death bed that he had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which had never happened"

### **Should Statements:**

You tell yourself that you should or shouldn’t do things. These statements carry heavy judgment as well as unnecessary shame or guilt. I always like to ask, “Who says you should?” One way to help with these should statements is to think in terms of “would have liked” or “would have preferred”. By rephrasing these thoughts, you can greatly reduce the negative impact on your mood or anxiety.

### **Labeling:**

You label yourself through broad generalizations and leave out the crucial specifics. I am a loser, jerk, failure etc.

### **Negative Filter:**

Have you ever heard the saying “She sees the world through rose colored glasses?” Well a negative filter is the opposite. This means that you tend to view the world in a negative way and you pay for it with heightened anxiety or other uncomfortable emotions. This negative perspective keeps you focusing on the negatives and ignoring the positives. If your filter is really strong, you are convinced that the positives don’t even exist.

### **Over-Generalizing:**

This distortion mostly defines itself. You make sweeping statements based on one or two events. You oversimplify or take a broad view that is not well supported by the circumstances.

### **Magnification:**

This occurs when you blow things out of proportion or magnify them beyond what is factual. You give too much importance to one thing or situation which causes unnecessary emotional distress.

### **Catastrophizing:**

This may be made up word, but it means you tend to think everything is a catastrophe or disaster. “Because I forgot to put out the napkins, the whole party is ruined” or “My career is over since I blanked out during my presentation” etc.

### **All or Nothing or Black and White:**

This is the type of thinking where you see things all one way or another with no middle ground, either black or white. The world typically does not work this way. Usually things occur on a range or continuum. Often things are neither black nor white, but a shade of grey.

### **Emotional Reasoning:**

This is when you make assumptions based on how you feel or when you ignore the facts, but are excessively tuned into how you feel. For instance, “I feel worried, therefore I am unsafe” or “I feel guilty therefore I did something wrong” or “I feel discouraged, so I must be hopeless”. Although your emotions may be telling you something important, often they are way off base and the facts are not taken into consideration.