Common Cognitive Distortions

Thinking shortcuts can feel convincing. Naming them creates room for a more accurate response.

Patterns to notice

All-or-nothing thinking	Seeing only total success or total failure, with no middle ground.
Overgeneralizing	Treating one event as proof of an enduring pattern.
Mental filter	Focusing on the negative while discounting relevant positive information.
Mind reading	Assuming you know what someone thinks without enough evidence.
Fortune telling	Predicting a negative outcome as though it is already settled.
Catastrophizing	Jumping to the worst possible outcome or underestimating your ability to cope.
Emotional reasoning	Assuming that because something feels true, it must be true.
Should statements	Using rigid rules that create shame, anger, or unrealistic expectations.
Labeling	Reducing a whole person to a global judgment based on one behavior or mistake.
Personalization	Taking excessive responsibility for outcomes influenced by many factors.

Try a more flexible question

- What facts am I using, and what important facts might I be leaving out?
- What is the most likely outcome - not only the worst outcome?
- Can I describe the behavior without turning it into a label?
- Would words such as prefer, hope, or value be more accurate than should?

Practice worksheet

The thought I noticed:

The distortion(s) that may be present:

A more complete description of the facts:

A balanced replacement thought:

This handout is educational and is not a substitute for individualized assessment or treatment. If you are in immediate danger, call 911. In the United States, call or text 988 for crisis support.

Attribution: Cognitive distortion concepts derive from Beck, A. T. (1976), *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders*; many familiar labels were popularized by Burns, D. D. (1980), *Feeling Good*. ThisLife wording and worksheet © 2026.