

Identify Cognitive Distortions

Whenever we feel distressed, anxious, or down, we tend to exaggerate, oversimplify or make harsh judgments. These are called ‘cognitive distortions,’ which is therapy-speak, for thoughts that might sound rational and true but are twisted by our fears. They are distortions of the truth and facts. They are the **emotional hooks** that make us spiral and feel hopeless about the future.

Distortion or Emotional Hook	UNHOOK	Realistic Helpful Alternatives
Mind reading. Assumes that you know what people think without having sufficient evidence of their thoughts: <i>He thinks I'm a loser.</i>	Refocus on the facts.	<i>I don't know what he is thinking. I am trying my best.</i>
Fortune-telling. Predicts the future, things will get worse or there is danger ahead: <i>I won't get the job.</i>	Focus on what you have influence over.	<i>I am anxious but I will do my best.</i>
Catastrophizing. Predicts the worst-case scenario or that you won't be able to stand it: <i>I'll always be a failure.</i>	Remember that other outcomes exist and you are resilient.	<i>Failing would be tough but I would be ok.</i>
Labeling. Assigns global negative traits to yourself and others: <i>I'm a loser.</i>	You are made up of many other traits too.	<i>Sometimes I mess up and sometimes I don't. I am only human.</i>
Discounting positives. Trivializes the positives that you or others attain: <i>Those successes were easy, so they don't matter.</i>	Look at the whole picture.	<i>I accomplished something.</i>
Negative filter. Focuses almost exclusively on the negatives and discounts the positives: <i>Nobody likes me.</i>	Look for exceptions to the statement.	<i>Some people like me and some don't. I am grateful for my friends.</i>
Overgeneralizing. Perceives a global pattern on the basis of a single incident: <i>This happens to me all the time. I fail at everything.</i>	Replace absolutes (all, never, everything) with relatives (sometimes, some things)	<i>I'm not great at this. But I'm good at other things. And I can get better.</i>
All-or-nothing thinking. Views events/people in all-or-nothing terms: <i>Either I am a success or a failure.</i>	Most things lie somewhere in the middle.	<i>I got rejected this time. This is hard. But I learned something for next time.</i>
Shoulds. Disempowers by judging as good or bad rather accepting what is and focusing on what can change: <i>I should be prepared.</i>	Focus on what you can change and accept what is outside your control.	<i>I want to do well. I prefer to feel prepared. So I will prepare.</i>
Personalizing. Attributes a disproportionate amount of blame to yourself and fails to acknowledge others' impact on events: <i>The marriage ended because I am a failure.</i>	Focus on the big picture,	<i>We both made mistakes. We were incompatible.</i>
Blaming others. Attributes your negative feelings only to others. Dismisses responsibility for changing yourself: <i>She ruined my day.</i>	Focus on what you can do to make it better.	<i>What she did didn't feel good. What can I do now to feel better?</i>
Unfair comparisons. Interprets events in terms of unrealistic standards, primarily others doing better: <i>Everybody else did it better than me.</i>	Discounts other facts or factors.	<i>I did my best. I'll learn from my mistakes and work hard to improve.</i>
Regret orientation. Focuses solely on the past, rather than on what you can do better now: <i>Look at all the time I wasted.</i>	Focused on regret and not learning.	<i>I will learn from my mistake and do better next time.</i>

Break the Self-defeating Thinking Habit

To break the ANT habit, we reality check our ANTs (critical self-talk and anxious predictions). Negative Core Beliefs and Rules for Living can pop up too. Then we come up with alternatives that are both more realistic and more helpful. Reality checking will not make the ANTs go away. They are habitual and stem from entrenched negative beliefs. But we can gain distance from the ANTs and create healthier rebuttals.

Reality-Check Automatic Negative Thoughts and Beliefs

Situation: Write down what was happening right before you become upset.	
Feelings: Write down your feelings.	
Thoughts: Write down your ANTs. Circle one that you want to challenge (the thought that you find most upsetting is useful). While doing this exercise, focus only on the ANT that you chose, not other thoughts or beliefs. Rate your level of belief 1-100%.	
Cognitive Distortions: Reality check the ANT using the Cognitive Distortions list. Write down the ones that apply. There are usually several that will apply.	
Supporting evidence: Write down all the evidence that supports your ANT. Evidence is the opposite of cognitive distortions. It is not based on feelings, opinions, or predictions, it's based on facts. Will it stand up in a court of law? <i>I will screw it up</i> , is not a fact, it predict the future. And Fortune tellers are not allowed in courts of law.	Evidence against: Write down all evidence that refutes your ANT. Again, evidence is based on fact and not feelings. Then, reality check all of the evidence to make sure that none of the cognitive distortions apply.
Realistic Alternative Thought: Realistic alternatives considers all of the evidence. Ask yourself, <i>realistically</i> what is the worst that could happen and what could you do to make it better?	
Helpful Alternative Thought: Helpful alternatives show understanding and encouragement to yourself and others. Ask yourself, what would I tell a friend to help her feel better?	
Subsequent emotions: Notice how the replacement makes you feel in comparison the ANT. How much do you believe the ANT now? 0-100%	

Reality-Check Automatic Negative Thoughts and Beliefs

Situation:	
Feelings:	
Automatic Negative Thoughts: Circle one that you want to challenge	
Level of belief 1-100%.	
Cognitive Distortions:	
Supporting evidence:	Evidence against:
Realistic Alternative Thought: (<i>Realistically</i> what is the worst that could happen and what could you do to make it better?)	
Helpful Alternative Thought: (Understanding and encouraging, what would you tell a friend to help her feel better?)	
Subsequent emotions:	
Level of belief/original ANT now? 0-100%	

Automatic Negative Thoughts, Realistic & Helpful Alternatives Record

Record your most common ANTs and Negative Core Beliefs and their Realistic (*realistically* what happened or could happen and what could you do to make it better?) and Helpful (what would you say to a friend to make them feel better?) alternatives.

ANTs and NCBs	Realistic Alternatives	Helpful Alternatives
<i>I failed. I'm never going to do it right.</i>	<i>I got rejected this time. This is hard. But I learned some pointers for next time.</i>	<i>And well done me for trying!</i>