

Thought Distortions

Any event, whether negative or positive, can set off a string of thoughts, feelings, and actions. Sometimes the thoughts can happen so quickly that we are unaware of them and what their affect is on our reactions. These thoughts are considered distorted. Distorted thoughts can be negative or positive but the negative ones often give people the most trouble. These negative thoughts can not only affect the way we react to situations around us but they can also have a strong influence on the way we think of ourselves and our abilities.

The best time to notice thoughts that are distorted is when you experience a very strong negative feeling that comes on quickly. For example, right before feeling angry you might have had a very quick and instantaneous thought like, "This person will let me down." This thought can increase your feeling of anger even before the person has said a word. If you can slow down the process between thinking and feeling, it is possible to identify and correct these negative thoughts. If possible, take a few deep breaths and examine the thoughts going through your head right at that moment.

Once you have identified the thought, take some time to examine it. There may be some information that supports the thought, but perhaps there is additional information to support a more helpful thought. In the example above, there may be some evidence that the person will let you down because they have done so in the past. However, a more helpful thought would be, "Even if I am disappointed, I will be fine."

Practice replacing distorted thoughts with more helpful thoughts using the tips to the right and on the next page.

When faced with situations that heighten our emotions, our thoughts can become automatic and often distorted. These negative thoughts or thought distortions can be organized into a few main types:

Forecasting – Automatically thinking that something will turn out badly – *EXAMPLE:* Even though I just moved in, I know that this home is not going to be a good fit for me.

Catastrophizing – Entertaining increasingly negative expectations for your future, and anticipating the worst possible outcome – *EXAMPLE:* My parents were not able to take care of me, I will never find anyone who wants to care for me.

All or nothing – Thinking about yourself or events that you experience in extremes with no middle ground – *EXAMPLE:* My mom did not show up for our visit last time, she probably forgot that I exist.

Emotional reasoning – Giving your feelings control over your thoughts – *EXAMPLE:* I feel nervous about seeing my social worker, I know that she will have bad news for me.

Negative filter – Ignoring positives and only thinking of the negative – *EXAMPLE:* Since I am in foster care I am a bad child regardless of my other good qualities like being smart, funny, and a good friend.

Personalization – Believing that everything other people say or do is caused by something you did – *EXAMPLE:* My foster mom had to go to work early and could not take me to school today. I know the real reason she did not take me is because I forgot to clean up my room.

Mind reading – Assuming that others thoughts or feelings towards you are negative – *EXAMPLE:* Whenever I come home I know my new family is thinking I should go away.

Should statements – Framing thoughts as "should's," "shouldn't's," and "ought to's" and feeling guilty if you are unable to meet these standards – *EXAMPLE:* I need to stop being so shy, I should be able to make new friends in the first week at a new school.

Just like the examples above, negative thoughts often have very little evidence that proves them to be true. Think about the proof you have that a negative thought is accurate before you allow yourself to become overwhelmed by it.

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Use the following questions to help you pay more attention to any automatic or distorted thoughts that you may have and consider ways to 'swap out' these negative thoughts for more positive ones.

1. Think about a time that you felt upset.

Describe the situation.

I moved into my first foster home after my dad went to prison. When I got there it was really hard to make friends and fit in.

2. Identify the feeling and the thought that came immediately before the feeling.

FEELING: I felt lonely and misunderstood by the other kids in the neighborhood.

THOUGHT: I am never going to make any friends at this school.

3. Circle which type of thought distortion might be at work:

FORECASTING EMOTIONAL REASONING MIND READING
CATASTROPHIZING NEGATIVE FILTER SHOULD STATEMENTS
ALL OR NOTHING PERSONALIZATION

4. Make a list of evidence that supports the thought and evidence that contradicts the thought:

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE:

All of the kids think I am Mexican but I am El Salvadorian, they ignore me, I feel like a minority within a minority.

COUNTER EVIDENCE:

I still have my sisters so I am not all alone. Yesterday I ate lunch with a few kids from my homeroom they laughed at one of my jokes.

5. Identify a replacement thought that is more balanced and helpful:

I just have not given the other kids a chance to get to know me.

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