

Daily Mood Log (Part 3): Identifying and Explaining Distortions

By recognizing the specific thinking errors in our negative thoughts and actively dissecting them, we can shift from self-criticism to a balanced perspective.

What Are Cognitive Distortions?

Cognitive distortions are predictable, systematic errors in our thinking that twist our perception of reality. Instead of seeing situations clearly and objectively, these mental blind spots act like funhouse mirrors, warping our perspective and convincing us of things that simply aren't true. They trick us into believing the worst about ourselves, others, and the world around us. When we accept these distorted thoughts as absolute facts, they fuel intense negative emotions and can leave us feeling completely stuck. Understanding that these are just "thinking errors" and not the ultimate truth is the first step toward breaking free from their grip.

Common Cognitive Distortions

All-or-Nothing Thinking: You view things in absolute, black-and-white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.

Overgeneralization: You view a single negative event such as a romantic rejection or a career setback as a never-ending pattern of defeat.

Mental Filter: You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively, darkening your vision of reality, much like a drop of ink that discolors a beaker of water.

Discounting the Positive: You reject positive experiences and insist your positive qualities do not count. This allows you to maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.

Jumping to Conclusions: You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.

- *Mind Reading:* You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you don't bother to check it out.
- *Fortune Telling:* You anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already-established fact.

Magnification or Minimization: You exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up or someone else's achievement), or you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own desirable qualities or the other person's imperfections).

Emotional Reasoning: You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel it, therefore it must be true."

"Should" Statements: You try to motivate yourself with "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts," as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. "Musts" and "oughts" are also offenders. When directed against yourself, they lead to guilt and frustration; when directed against others, they lead to anger and resentment.

Labeling: This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a loser." When someone else's behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to them: "They are a jerk."

Personalization and Blame: You blame yourself for something you weren't entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook ways that your own attitudes and behavior might have contributed to a problem.

The "Explain the Distortions" Technique

This technique is utilized either during or right after the process of identifying the distortions within a negative thought. Now that you have pinpointed the specific thoughts driving your distress and established your emotional goals, it is time to actively challenge them. Simply naming a distortion is a great start, but to truly break its grip, we must unravel it.

The Three Crucial Questions

For every distortion you spot in a negative thought, you will ask yourself three vital questions:

- **Why is this an example of the distortion?** Look closely at the thought to see how it fits the definition. For instance, if you identify "all-or-nothing thinking," you would explain how the thought is framing a situation as an absolute extreme without recognizing any middle ground.
- **Why is this a thinking error?** Identify why this specific way of thinking is inaccurate, unfair, or out of touch with reality.
- **Why is this self-defeating?** Reflect on how dwelling on this error harms you. You might notice that it makes you feel worse, demotivates you, or makes it incredibly difficult to focus on your day.

By answering these questions, you unravel the thought pattern and make room for a healthier, more realistic mindset.

How You Can Use This Technique (Part 3)

Step 1. Select one of the negative thoughts you recorded in Part 1 that you would like to work on. Write it down.

Step 2. Identify the cognitive distortions present in that thought. Ask yourself these question to explain the distortions -

- Why is this an example of the distortion?
- Why is this a thinking error?
- Why is this self-defeating?

Distortions	Answer to questions
☐ All-or-Nothing Thinking	
☐ Overgeneralization	
☐ Discounting the Positive	
☐ Jumping to Conclusions	
☐ Magnification or Minimization	
☐ Emotional Reasoning	

☐ "Should" Statements	
☐ Labeling	
☐ Personalization and Blame	

Step 3. Repeat step 1-2 on another negative thought from part 1.

What Comes Next

This part of the Daily Mood Log helps us clearly understand the cognitive distortions and explain exactly why they are thinking errors. Doing this sets us up to create strong, realistic positive thoughts to push back against the negative ones. The next steps will involve using other powerful skills and tools to generate those positive thoughts and experience even more relief.

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- **Look for the Balance:** Distortions often push us to extremes. When identifying a thinking error, look for the in-between that makes more sense for the majority of people in the world.
 - **Acknowledge Your Growth:** You might make mistakes, but challenging your thoughts proves you are growing, improving, and striving for a balanced perspective.
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Final Note

When we are caught in the grip of a strong negative emotion, our thoughts feel like absolute, unshakeable facts. However, the most powerful insight you can gain from this exercise is the realization that you do not have to believe everything you think. By taking the time to explicitly identify and explain these distortions, you are creating a crucial pause between a triggering event and your emotional reaction. This separates who you are from what you are experiencing. It allows you to view your own inner dialogue with curiosity and logic rather than judgment, proving that your distress is not a permanent reality, but simply a correctable thinking error.