

# Paradoxical Magnification

## What is Paradoxical Magnification?

You may have heard of the cognitive distortion known as magnification or catastrophizing, where you exaggerate things negatively. Paradoxical Magnification takes this concept and flips it: what if you exaggerate that negative thought to an even more ridiculous degree?

By intentionally blowing a negative thought completely out of proportion, it can paradoxically bring us tremendous relief rather than more pain and distress. When we exaggerate a thought to an extreme amount, it makes the idea seem a bit silly, which helps us uncover the truth and create a powerful positive thought to overcome negative emotions.

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## Case Example: *"I am a bad person"*

Joanna shared that she had been struggling with feelings of guilt and self-consciousness. On her way into her office building, she was not thinking and accidentally let the door close on another woman, only to find out later that the woman was pregnant. She began telling herself critical thoughts like "I am a bad person" because she believed she should have held the door, especially for a pregnant woman.

- **Therapist:** The thought "I am a bad person" brings up so much distress for you. Paradoxical magnification can help with getting relief. It is a technique where you blow this thought out of proportion and make it sound ridiculous. It will be important to make it sound as ridiculous as possible because if it is not, it can bring more pain. Is this something you are willing to try?
- **Joanna:** Yes, I got it. As ridiculous as possible.
- **Therapist:** Great. How can you magnify or over-catastrophize the thought "I am a bad person"?
- **Joanna:** People would consider me the worst person in the entire world. In fact, people often compare me to the serial killer Jeffery Dahmer. I think I would be receiving the award for Worst Person of 2022! (*Big smile on her face*).
- **Therapist:** Haha, that was great. I see a smile on your face, what is coming up for you?
- **Joanna:** It is just so ridiculous. Being a bad person just for forgetting to hold the door for a pregnant woman. People forget all the time. Nothing like a serial killer who has the intent to hurt people. What I did was just an accident.

After the exercise, Joanna was able to see how she catastrophized the situation and realized it was no big deal compared to what other people in history might have done. She was able to be more realistic and more compassionate towards herself.

## How You Can Use This Technique

**Step 1.** Identify a negative thought running through your mind. Write it down:

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**Step 2.** Make that thought sound so ridiculous that it might even sound humorous. The goal is to make it extreme. Remember that if the thought is making you feel worse, it might not be extreme enough.

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**Step 3.** Ask yourself: how ridiculous is this new thought you created in step 2? If it is not ridiculous, please go back to step 2 and try again. If it is ridiculous, write down exactly why it is ridiculous.

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**Step 4.** How are you feeling now about the initial negative thought from step 1? What positive thoughts can you write down?

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## Important Things to Keep in Mind

- This technique doesn't work for everyone. If it doesn't feel right, other approaches may help more.
- Remember that the more extreme you magnify the thought, the less painful it should feel.
- It can be challenging to do this technique on your own. It might help to do it with a therapist.
- Some thoughts might not work with paradoxical magnification.
- This technique usually works better with vague thoughts rather than highly specific thoughts.

## Final Note

Paradoxical Magnification is a humor-based technique where you blow things out of proportion, similar to the cognitive distortion of magnification or catastrophizing. However, the intent behind this tool is to find relief rather than cause distress. When we make a negative thought sound silly, it can often help us uncover the truth behind it and create lasting relief.