

Distorted and Negative Thinking - (Accountability)

Instructions

1. Create a Google calendar reminder on your calendar to remind you to work on the assignment and when the assignment is due. Take a screenshot of the reminder and email pro@ctpberk.org the image.
2. Read through this document on Distorted and Negative Thinking.
3. After reading the document complete pages 9,11 and 13 add your answers to a **blank Google document** and share the document with the instructors at pro@ctpberk.org
4. If you have questions don't hesitate to ask the instructor for assistance.

Distorted Thinking

Many of us suffer bouts of what Aaron Beck, a distinguished psychiatrist and founder of Cognitive Therapy, described as distorted thinking—thinking that serves us in the short term by allowing us to, frankly, make excuses for our mood, and behavior or for giving up. Note that we ALL do this from time to time—how frequently depends on the person and how resilient they are. David Burns, another psychiatrist out of Stanford University, described fifteen different types of distorted thinking in his book *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*,¹ which are described below. Again, it's important to remember that all of us use many forms of distorted thinking from time to time—the trick is to catch ourselves doing it.

Read through each type of distorted thinking, along with the example, and on the line underneath each description, write down an instance where you have used this type of distortion in the past, and what you might be able to do to 'rethink' the situation in a more realistic and positive way.

1. **Filtering**—This is about taking a small negative detail, and focusing exclusively, or nearly so, on that one detail, rather than focusing on the many good things about a situation, person, or thing. Making a mountain out of a molehill is a phrase used to describe this type of thinking.

Example: The entire party was completely ruined by the fact that my mother forgot to buy the cheese balls that she knows I love. How could she do that?

2. **Polarized Thinking**— This is where everything is either good or bad, black or white, right or wrong—there is never anything in between, when in fact, many of life's questions can best be answered by 'it depends.' The biggest danger with this type of thinking is when you are thinking about yourself, that if you are not perfect in every way, you are a failure. This is sometimes called black-or-white thinking.

Example: I didn't get the part I wanted in the play. I am a complete failure.

3. **Overgeneralization**—This is where you state that a generalized outcome is based on a single or a small handful of incidents. Clues that you are overgeneralizing are by the and never. This can lead to as

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- using words always distortion a restricted life; you avoid future failures based on a single incident or event.

Example: I am never going to a party again. Not one person talked to me the entire time. This always happens.

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4. **Mind Reading**—Mind reading is when we assume we know how another person feels without their actually telling us how they feel. This is also called projection, as we are projecting our thoughts onto someone else. Another form of mind reading is when you assume that other people feel as you do, and will react as you do—that there is no difference in how you think and feel and how others might think and feel. Jumping to conclusions is a phrase that pretty well defines mind reading.

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Example: It's clear that she doesn't like me anymore. She called me four days in a row, and today, nothing. Crickets. She must hate me.

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5. **Catastrophizing**—While everyone should be prepared for true disasters, people experiencing catastrophized thinking are expecting disaster at every turn, and everything is preceded by a What if? Scenario, spelling ultimate ruin. Oftentimes, it helps to think in terms of probability and possibility—while it is possible that you could get hit by a crashing airplane while sitting in your backyard, the chance that this might happen is quite improbable. Living in fear and fear of the unexpected are terms that may signify catastrophizing.

Example: I am never swimming in the ocean again. Someone saw a shark 20 miles offshore last week. What if it comes in and attacks me?

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6. **Personalization**—This is when you assume that everyone's actions are in reaction to you, or that you are in competition with everyone else in the world. Cues that tell you are stuck in this type of thinking are It's because of me, or Everyone else. The point is that you feel as though you must question your worth at every turn. If someone does better than you on a test, you feel 'less than.' If something bad happens, you assume that it's your fault. Taking it personally is a phrase that we use to describe this.

Example: She clearly wore that dress to my birthday party because she knows I absolutely hate the color orange. She did it just to bug me.

7. **Control Fallacies**—This comes in two different variants, and we can fall into each type, depending on the situation. The first type is what we call the victim type, where you believe that you are a victim of external forces, and have no power or control over your destiny. The second type is the perpetrator type, where you believe that you are responsible for other people's happiness—in fact, that it is your job to make other people happy. The terms we use to define these types of people are people pleasers and victims. Both suffer from a distortion about how much control they actually have in their lives or on others.

Example: It's hopeless. I'm never going to get a job in this economy. I'm not even going to try.

8. **Fallacy of Fairness**—This type of thinking revolves around what you have personally defined as fair, and using this definition as a

measuring stick to judge others and their treatment of you. The problem is that others may not agree with your definition of fairness or even be aware that it exists! Resentment is frequently the result of a fallacy of fairness.

Example: Jonathan has not had me over for two weeks, and I'm not going to invite him back here until he invites me to his house first. It's not fair that it is always up to me to invite him over.

9. **Blaming**—Ah, blaming. This is a very common distortion, where we blame others for the things that happen to us, rather than take personal responsibility for our own choices and decisions and acknowledge that sometimes, stuff just happens. People who blame frequently do not know how to speak up and tell others what they want or need, and in silence, let others take action, only to later blame them for not responding to their (unspoken) needs. Don't blame me! It is a frequent retort by blamers themselves.

Example: It's not my fault, there's nothing on the menu I like to eat. You decided on the restaurant, not me!

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10. **Shoulds**—This is where you have an ironclad set of rules on how things should be (hamburgers should always have ketchup), how people should act (I can't believe he is wearing sandals), or think (everyone knows politicians are all idiots). Not only do you firmly believe that everyone should think and behave within these parameters without fail, but you also believe that you are at fault if

you fail to live up to your immutable expectations. You know you're in Shoulds when you use words like should, ought, and must.

Example: Everyone knows that you should eat dinner before 6 pm because it's not good to eat too close to bedtime. If you eat any later, you'll get sick.

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11. **Emotional Reasoning**—this is where you take a general feeling you are having and apply it to your entire personality. So, if you are feeling bored, then you are obviously a boring person. If you feel sick today, then you must be either dying or a hypochondriac. In other words, you allow an emotional state—which may be temporary—to define your entire being, for good or bad.

Example: I am absolutely unstoppable—I have won five games of poker, and I'm on fire. I am going to take all of my savings and go to Vegas. I am certain that I will win every time

12. **Fallacy of Change**—This is the expectation that if someone truly loves you, they will change for you. Two things are wrong with this thinking—one, that your feelings are more important than the other's feelings, and two, that other people control your happiness, when in fact you are the one who controls your happiness. This is a common problem in marriages, where one partner marries the other, thinking that s/he can change the other. A common phrase heard is If you really loved me, you would...

Example: If you were really my friend, it wouldn't bother you that I never take a shower.

13. **Global Labeling**—This is the root of many racial, gender, and cultural stereotypes. Some examples include: Chinese people being bad drivers; Women taking too long in the bathroom because they are so vain; Teenagers being self-centered and rude; All police officers being corrupt; and Gay men always trying to convert straight men. Global labeling ignores contrary evidence and lumps all people of a given group in an erroneous bag. The common indicator of global labeling is the qualifier ALL.

Example: I was in an accident yesterday, and of course, the person who hit me was Chinese. They are such horrid drivers.

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14. **Being Right**—The only way to be is right, or at least more right than the other person, right? Insisting on being right assumes that your position is the only correct position and that anyone who has a differing opinion is clearly wrong. While this may not sound so awful, do remember that the other person may feel equally as strongly about his or her position. Thus, no matter how strongly you feel about something, the concept of being right is nearly always subjective. And, if being right all the time means that you push other people out of your life, is being right all that important? If you had to choose between being happy and being right, which would you choose?

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Example: I don't care what you say, all Democrats or socialist goons who want to take away all of our individual rights, and I can't possibly accept anyone who doesn't believe the same thing, even if it means I never speak to my daughter again.

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15. **Heaven's Reward Fallacy**—This is one that many people get caught up in— sometimes it's called Tit for Tat, or playing the martyr, meaning that there is a scoreboard somewhere, where you or

someone else is keeping track of who has done what for whom. The object of this scorekeeping is either to make sure that the 'score' is 'even' (I do for you, and then you do for me), or that if we do lots of things for someone they will 'owe' us their love and constancy out of a sense of guilt.

Example: My son is so ungrateful. I worked my fingers to the bone for him all of my life, and now he won't even cancel a silly vacation to come visit when his aunt is in town. After everything I've done for him!

Now, go back and review the 15 types of distorted thinking, and write down the ones that you use most frequently, and jot down some ideas of how you can 'rethink' them:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Getting Stuck in Negativity

I have met very few people in life who never got stuck in a negative frame of mind. I can think of just two people who could always look on the positive side of life. Most of us get stuck in that Eeyore, gray-cloud thinking from time to time, and so it's useful for all of us to be mindful of this state, to be able to identify when we're stuck, and to learn how to get unstuck.

Most of us get stuck in situations where we have had difficulty being successful in the past. Sometimes, we might be in a completely new situation and still get stuck— because of past failures we perceive to be similar. The first step is to identify that you are stuck—which can be surprisingly difficult to do. All of us are very good at 'fooling' ourselves into believing that our thoughts are completely rational.

How do you know if you're stuck? Ask yourself if your responses are:

1. Based on always, never, should? (polarized thinking, overgeneralization)
2. Based on emotional responses such as I can't or won't be allowed? (personalization)
3. Based on everyone else's interference? (blaming, control fallacy)
4. Based on my need to be right?

Spending some time really looking and evaluating your responses critically and analytically will help you identify if you are stuck. But remember, the more resistant we are to looking at something in a new way, the more stuck we are—we have an emotional investment in not looking at the situation and not changing because change is often scary.

Fear of Change

Most of us fear to change—physically and emotionally, we are built for stasis, or 'standing still.' All of us like to have some things in our lives remain the same, because it is how we build structure and some level of comfortable normalcy in our lives. However—as the saying goes, the only constant is change, and so we need to learn to be less fearful of trying new things and doing things in a different way. This is particularly important when what we have been doing does not work, or when our behavior is impacting us in a negative way.

This begs the question—if we know that our behavior is causing trouble in our lives, why would we not want to change that behavior? The answer is often simple—because change would require that we take full responsibility and accountability for our lives, which in turn would mean that if something went wrong—we are responsible. No more blaming, no more externalizing, the virtual buck stops with us. That acceptance of personal responsibility is very uncomfortable for many of us. We don't want to be completely responsible because it's a huge weight to bear. But the bottom line is, we are already completely responsible anyway—we just need to acknowledge it and accept it.

So, take a few minutes now, and try to identify a few of your 'favorite' things you are resistant to change—things you know you need to change, but don't

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5

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Now, write down why you think you are resistant to change these same things:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

When you review the list above, you might see that some of the things you don't want to change are not really important to you right now. Or are they? Be careful to not 'fool yourself' into believing that something that really is important to you, isn't! Silencing Negative Thoughts

When you are able to ascertain that you are in fact experiencing negative or distorted thinking, the next question is: how do you stop? This may be a hard question to answer because as noted above, many of us are quite wedded to our negative thoughts because then we do not have to take responsibility. And if we take responsibility and things don't go well, we have to blame ourselves. Right?

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Well, actually, wrong! The need to blame is often the crux of the problem. Why do we feel we need to blame someone if things don't go well—yes, we need to take responsibility, and we need to try, but we don't have to blame anyone, even ourselves if things do not work out. We simply need to learn from our experiences, figure out a different path, and try again. Where does blame fit into this equation? It doesn't

Yes, this sounds simple, but we are so used to assigning blame that it is very difficult to do this in practice, especially if blame has been a part of our family system over the years. Silencing negative thoughts, then, takes work and practice. Here are some ways that people have been successful at silencing negative thoughts:

Q Talk therapy

Cognitive-Behavior therapy

Hypnotherapy

Group therapy

Q Meditation

Relaxation tapes

Q

Self-reflection Q

Affirmations

All of these are good ways to reduce the 'back seat driver' in our brains that guide our negative thinking. Would any of them work for you? Have you tried any of them, and did they work? Which ones would you be willing to try, or try again? Put a checkmark by the ideas above that sound appealing or useful.

How to Believe

I will tell you a secret. The bottom line in all of these techniques is that you have to believe that you can change and that you are worth the effort to change. Let me say that again—you have to believe that you can change and that you are worth it.

Believing that change is possible, and believing that you are worth the effort, may be the hardest part of moving from distorted thinking into more rational thoughts. For people who have a difficult time with this, group therapy and ongoing affirmations seem to work best. You need to be continually reminded—until you believe in yourself— that you are in fact worth the effort, and that you can change if you wish.