15 COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

We all get trapped in “mind tricks” that distort how we see ourselves or our situations. These **cognitive distortions** are common thinking patterns that can fuel stress and self-doubt. Learning to spot them is the first step toward replacing them with clearer, more balanced thoughts.

1. POLARIZED THINKING

You see things as completely good or completely bad. It’s like believing you’re a failure if you don’t ace every test. Real life usually happens somewhere in the middle.

2. MENTAL FILTERING

NEGATIVE MENTAL FILTERING

You focus only on the one negative comment and ignore all the positive feedback. When you zero in on what went wrong, you miss what went right.

DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

You brush off your achievements, thinking they “don’t count” or were just luck. Give yourself credit because you studied, showed up, and made it happen.

3. OVERGENERALIZATION

You take one setback and assume it defines everything. Getting a bad grade once doesn’t mean you’ll always do poorly; it just means you had a rough exam.

4. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

MIND READING

You assume you know what others are thinking (“My professor must hate me”). Don’t guess, ask questions or wait for the facts and until then, assume the best.

FORTUNE TELLING

You assume you already know how things will turn out, like predicting you’ll fail before you’ve even started studying. Stay open. The future isn’t written yet.

5. CATASTROPHIZING

MAGNIFICATION

You blow things out of proportion, turning small setbacks into major disasters. Missing one quiz or deadline doesn’t mean the whole semester is ruined.

MINIMIZATION

You downplay your achievements or strengths, acting like they don’t matter. Finishing that project or showing up to class still counts, give yourself credit.

6. PERSONALIZATION

You assume everything is your fault, even when it’s not. If a group project falls apart, remember: responsibility is shared, not all on your shoulders. Some things are completely our of your control.

7. BLAMING

You place all the responsibility on others and ignore your own part. Growth happens when you look at what’s in your control and learn from it.

8. LABELING

You turn mistakes into identities for yourself. For instance, calling yourself “lazy” instead of recognizing you were tired or overwhelmed that day. Actions aren’t the same as who you are.

9. ALWAYS BEING RIGHT

You value being correct so much that it’s hard to admit mistakes. Internalize opinions as facts and will put others on trial to prove they are right. In college and life, being open to feedback helps you learn and grow faster than perfection ever will.

10. SHOULD STATEMENTS

You pressure yourself with words like “should,” “must,” or “shouldn’t” or rigid rules like “I should be studying 24/7.” Try replacing “should” with “I’d like to” or “I’m working on.” These options are more flexible and forgiving and also can spark growth.

11. EMOTIONAL REASONING

You believe your feelings must be facts (“I feel stupid, so I must be stupid”). The emotion is accepted as fact because al logical reasoning is blocked out. Feelings are valid, but they’re not always accurate reflections of reality.

12. CONTROL FALLACIES

EXTERNAL CONTROL FALLACY

You believe other people or outside forces completely control your life. It may feel like you have no say, but you still have choices in how you respond and move forward.

INTERNAL CONTROL FALLACY

You think you’re responsible for everything that happens around you. Not everything is your fault and some things are just beyond your control.

13. FALLACY OF CHANGE

You believe things will only be okay if others change to suit your needs or interests. You can’t control people, but you can control how you respond and set boundaries.

14. FALLACY OF FAIRNESS

You expect life to always feel “fair” and get upset with feelings of anger and resentment when it doesn’t. Fairness matters, but not everything will be balanced and that doesn’t mean your effort wasn’t worth it.

15. HEAVEN’S REWARD FALLACY

You believe hard work or suffering guarantees a payoff later. For instance, thinking all-night study sessions will automatically earn an A. Effort matters, but results depend on strategy, balance, and timing too.

Your thoughts are powerful, but they’re not facts.

The more you practice catching cognitive distortions, the more control you gain over your mindset, focus, and success.

Reflection:

Which of these thinking traps do you notice most often during stressful weeks? How does it show up in your thoughts or self-talk?
What’s one realistic way you could challenge or reframe that thought next time?