Cognitive Distortions - It's Not What It Seems

Everyone has unhelpful thought patterns that distort how we see ourselves and our success. Also known as cognitive distortions, these "mind traps" can make stress feel bigger, confidence feel smaller, and motivation harder to find. The goal of this worksheet is to help you notice when you've fallen into a trap, name it, and reframe it into something more realistic and empowering.

Cognitive distortions are sneaky thought habits that make you believe something unhelpful or extreme even when it's not true. They trap your brain into reacting with stress or self-criticism instead of problem-solving.

Spot the Trap

Start by learning to recognize the unhelpful thought patterns that sneak in and distort your perspective. Awareness is the first step to escaping them.

COMMON COGNITIVE DISTORTION	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE	REALITY CHECK
ALL OR NOTHING THINKING	"If I don't get an A, I failed."	Progress happens in shades of gray and not black and white.
OVERGENERALIZING	"I always mess up presentations."	One bad experience doesn't define all future ones.
MENTAL FILTERING	"I only focus on the one thing I did wrong."	Notice what went *right* as well to balance your perspective.
CATASTROPHIZING	"If I miss one deadline, I'll fail the class."	Slow down, take a breath: one setback doesn't predict disaster.
MIND READING	"My professor probably thinks I'm lazy."	You can't know what others think. Ask or assume best intent.
SHOULD STATEMENTS	"I *should* be more motivated."	Turn "should" into "I could try..." to spark action, not guilt.

Pick one trap you've fallen into recently. Write down what it sounded like in your mind, and then rewrite it as a "reframe" that feels truer and more self-compassionate.

You Have the Power

When you reframe a thought, you're literally rewiring your brain. Each time you challenge a distorted belief, your prefrontal cortex (the rational, planning part of your brain) strengthens its connection with your amygdala (the fear center). Over time, this builds emotional regulation and resilience. It's like strength training for your brain.

Which mind trap shows up most for you during exams or high stress?

What's one small action you can take when you notice that trap next time?

How does reframing change how you feel, not just how you think?