

COMMON DISTORTED THINKING PATTERNS

We all get ourselves a little twisted sometimes. I start to think the world will collapse if I miss the trailers that run before the movie starts at the theater. I question my ability to function as an adult when I occasionally falter in completing my responsibilities (as a parent, business owner, therapist, etc.). Sometimes, I blame others, complain unnecessarily, and make utterly unhelpful assumptions about my circumstances and the people around me. In summary, I can simply say...I am human. My mind carries me to places that create and amplify distress without regard to reality. My thoughts become distorted and I suffer the consequences. The examples above are a few common iterations of distorted thinking. In the pages to follow, I'll breakdown some of the more destructive patterns and offer tips on how to manage these ten beasts:

- *Catastrophizing*
- *The Mental Filter*
- *Black-and-White Thinking*
- *Mind-Reading*
- *Emotional Reasoning*
- *'Shoulding'*
- *Personalization*
- *False Permanence*
- *Blaming*
- *Magical Thinking*

As you begin to challenge these distortions, take the time to write down the specific unhelpful thoughts you recognize and the alternative thinking patterns that will set you on the path to healthier ways of perceiving your experiences. You'll see overlap in how these patterns feed into one another, each one making the others a little easier to believe, creating a seemingly unified (albeit distorted) vision of life. Don't be fooled.

- **Catastrophizing:** With this distortion, all things become epic disasters (at least in your head). When we catastrophize, a poor grade on a test becomes a wasted semester. An unanswered phone-call becomes a break-up, a death, or some sort of missing person scenario. Stomach pain becomes an aggressive cancerous tumor, and being late for a meeting becomes certain termination and chronic unemployment.

Challenging Catastrophizing: This negative fortune-telling often stems from the question, "What if...?" One solution is to answer the "what if..." question in a way that is NOT distressing. The poor grade on the test merely means some additional studying on the next test. The unanswered phone call is because of a mid-afternoon nap or a phone that was incapacitated due to being dropped in the toilet. More important than making a more optimistic prediction is the recognition that the assumptions we make are nothing more than creative thinking, a short-story brainstorming session, a fiction writing workshop. There is no need to

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respond (emotionally or otherwise) as if those thoughts/prediction/assumptions are reality. If you "just know" something horrible is going to happen, you're likely catastrophizing and would benefit from loosening your grip on the negative narrative.

- **Mental Filter:** An oil filter removes foreign objects to keep your engine running smoothly. A pool filter keeps the water free of debris, allowing you to enjoy a cool dip in pristine water. The distorted mental filter, however, leaves you with only the gunk, eliminating the helpful, supportive, validating thoughts necessary for us to flourish. There are two major types of filter and they are often applied together. Both are frequently self-directed, but they can be just as harmful in interpersonal relationships.
 1. **Focusing on the negative:** One version of this filter effortlessly and automatically hones in on all the worst aspects of any experience. Did you misspell one word in that 10-page assignment? The negative mental filter focuses in on that solitary mistake and shouts "FAILURE" rather than embracing the accomplishment of completing a lengthy assignment (even if there were a few mistakes). A great evening out with your spouse may go down the tubes because of a 5-minute conflict or one awkward moment. One small piece of constructive feedback from a boss after heaping praise on you? Focusing on the negative has you believing the boss is going to fire you (or at least hoping you quit).
 2. **Dismissing the positive:** This form of the mental filter often goes hand-in-hand with a negative focus...but it doesn't even require you to make an actual mistake or have an uncomfortable experience. When your automatic response to a compliment is, "You're just being nice" or "You don't really mean that." You're viewing life through this filter. When you win the gold medal and follow it with a "Yeah, but..." you're becoming more effective at diluting, dismissing, rejecting, and otherwise avoiding the joyful experiences in your life. Dismissing the positive means you don't receive, in any genuine way, the validation, recognition, or appreciation being offered in your daily interactions.

Challenging the Mental Filter: When you find yourself focusing on the negative, strive for balance - the ability to identify and embrace the dichotomy inherent in everything. **KEYWORD = AND.** "I wrote a great paper AND there were a couple mistakes." "My supervisor likes my customer service AND I've still got a few things to learn about the computer system." To challenge the tendency to dismiss the positive, work on providing yourself a little more validation, recognition, and appreciation on your own terms. Find a reason to pat yourself on the back. If you're not that impressed with winning the gold medal, congratulate yourself on the hard work and commitment the award symbolizes. Just find the reason. Some days that reason is small - getting out of bed, eating something besides Doritos for breakfast, or just brushing your teeth. Don't let the relative simplicity of the task stop you from celebrating the accomplishment. When other people compliment you or want to recognize your greatness in some way, say "thank you," and refrain from discrediting their high opinion of you*. Also see ['Coach or Critic'](#) for more thoughts on how to be a little less self-critical.

*This pertains to compliments and positive feedback delivered in a respectful way by well-meaning individuals. "Compliments" in the form of cat-calls or unsolicited objectification can be summarily ignored, redirected, rejected or confronted as necessary.

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- **Black and White Thinking:** This distorted lens can create false dichotomies in any and every situation. It polarizes every effort, every person, and every experience. This means that your workout was either AMAZING or absolute MISERABLE. You looked PERFECT or HORRID. You're a great parent or an abject failure. You're the best or your nothing. Your goals DOMINATED or you FAILED. This distortion also seems to mandate the use of absolute language. Whenever you hear "always", "never", or "everytime", you're likely dealing with black-and-white thinking. Spending too much time thinking this way can easily lead to hopelessness – it becomes almost impossible to feel successful.

Challenging Black and White Thinking: You may see some significant similarities with the Mental Filter problem. These two distortions go together. By filtering out all positive aspects of person, thing, or experience, it quickly becomes an extremely negative version of itself. Black-and-White thinking confirms and amplifies the contrast between your hopes and your reality. Your task is to find the gentle middle ground in-between the harsh extremes. Acknowledge that you weren't perfect or horrid; your workout wasn't amazing or miserable. Most things are someplace in between. Allow for (and even cultivate) more complex perceptions. Actively identify the aspects that are going well and the ones that aren't – incorporate both sides, and avoid the absolutes. If your mind give you a "never" or "always," recognize it for what it is, and start to celebrate the successes that will almost certainly be found in the middle-ground.

- **Mind-Reading:** I'd like to believe that if I had the capacity to read minds, I would use it for more than confirming people's negative perceptions of me. Unfortunately, this distortion takes the concept of mind-reading to very dark places. The mind-reading distortion allows us to be fully hooked into the assumptions we make about what others are thinking. We become certain about their intentions and how they really feel. It may be something straightforward like, "She thinks I'm stupid" or "He hates me." Throw in a few additional layers of social networking and mind-reading becomes extremely complicate and messy. It can destroy relationships and lead to a sense of constant social pressure when the assumptions are self-critical. A wave and a smile becomes a sinister ruse aimed at tricking you into foolishly desiring a friendship you don't deserve (insert evil laugh)!!! Or...maybe it was just a smile and a wave.

Challenging Mind-Reading: It wouldn't be responsible for me to tell you to just stop doing it. I'll try to be a bit more helpful. A large factor in challenging this distortion is simply becoming aware of when you're doing it and then not buying into the story. If you're well practiced at mind-reading (many of us are), the information that was gathered telepathically immediately becomes integrated into the mental narrative as fact. Recognizing where the information came from can loosen the "fact" label significantly. Ask yourself, do I know this or am I assuming it? When in doubt, stick with external observations. What did they DO? What words did they say? List what you observed, making sure it's free of assumptions or judgments, then respond accordingly. *They smiled and waved, now I will smile and wave.*

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Alternatively many times you can just ask what someone is thinking or feeling. You might say, “I noticed you were scowling, and I’m a little worried you’re upset about something I did.” No need to assume. If you insist on assuming, and creating a narrative based on those assumptions, the very least you can do, is build and interesting and helpful narrative rather than one that is destructive and critical.

- **Emotional Reasoning:** When reality becomes distorted by Emotional Reasoning, we’ve allowed emotions to be in the driver’s seat while we sit in the back, eyes closed and hoping for the best. Our emotional experience defines the entire experience. Some examples are personal and internal – “I felt anxious before/during/after the presentation, so it must have been horrible.” Notice the evaluation of the situation is based entirely on the emotion rather than the actual execution of the presentation. While emotional reasoning applied to performances can drastically reduce your ability to feel successful, when it’s applied to broader concepts it can be even more harmful. “I feel worthless, so I must have done something wrong or I must not be doing enough” “I feel sad, so it’s going to be a bad day...It will be impossible to enjoy anything.” This type of reasoning can be equally destructive in interpersonal relationships. “I feel hurt, so Johnny must have done something wrong.” Again, you’ll notice that the evaluation has nothing to do with what’s being evaluated; it’s based solely on the emotional experience.

Challenging Emotional Reasoning: In every example above, the disconnect between the evaluation and the target of evaluation was clear, and it’s much harder to see that distinction when you’re the one in the situation. Therefore, to successfully change this distortion, one of the first things we want to do is increase awareness and acceptance of emotions WITHOUT EVALUATION. The practice involves identifying and describing emotions...then stopping the narrative. “I feel hurt...my muscles are tense; I’m hot; I’m crying.” There is no need to judge yourself, your emotions, or anybody else when you’re hurt. Identify it, describe it, and then decide what action you want to take (if any). “I’m hurt. I feel it in my whole body. I want to exercise because when I’m hurt, taking care of myself is even more important.” Another strategy for dealing with emotional reasoning is to preemptively define success without depending on emotions. Setting a goal like “I’m going to be super relaxed during my presentation.” means your success is based exclusively on your emotions (which you have limited control over). When you define success by other more behavioral factors (finishing within the time limit, maintaining eye contact, etc.), you can be anxious and successful. Whenever you recognize your emotions leading you down a path of judgement, criticism, or any other form of distorted thinking, step away from the situation, acknowledge and accept the emotions, then proceed according to your values instead of listening exclusively to your emotions.

- **Should Statements:** Why are “should” statements my favorite? Two main reasons. First, we use “should” so ubiquitously that everyone has multiple opportunities to catch this pattern of distorted thinking on a daily basis. Secondly, there are really straight forward ways of challenging these phrases. So, what is a “should” statement. Any time you use “should” you’re committing a small act of harm to your

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mental well-being. The more powerful the “should,” the more destructive it becomes. How can such a common word be so detrimental? It has to do with the subtle impact our language has on our beliefs and emotions. Every time we use the word “should” there is some amount of judgment and criticism that go along with it. “He should be doing his homework.” means that there is something wrong with him for not doing it, and he would be doing it “right” if he were doing his homework. “I should exercise more” carries the same subtle judgment – “I’m bad because of the amount of exercise I’m currently doing and I would be good if I exercised more” Whether it’s directed at yourself or someone else, that judgment and criticism, overtime, can be toxic. Another component that makes “should” harmful is the battle it consistently establishes. It’s a battle that sets you up to lose every time you use the word. “Should” implies that reality is not acceptable – it argues that reality is wrong. Reality, in any given moment, can’t be altered, and our past certainly can’t be changed. “I should have...” only serves to function as a critical (and largely unnecessary) judgment of something that cannot be changed. (Could, would, ought, and need are close cousins to “should” and create similar harmful effects).

One last problem with “shoulding.” It allows the user to feel righteous and therefore avoid responsibility for being an active participant in changing. Proclaiming how things “should” be, frequently leaves people feeling justified in their own inaction. “She should know better.” “He shouldn’t have said that.” “They should stop.” “This shop should be open.” The onus is placed firmly on the proverbial “other” to be responsible for change, greatly reducing the possibility of finding effective solutions.

Challenging “Should” Statements: Once it’s in your head that “should” is causing harm, you’ll start to recognize all the places you use it, directed at yourself and others. Replacing it can be difficult, even though it’s relatively a simple process of word replacement. In most circumstances, swapping “should” for “I want” is enough. “I want him to do his homework” and “I want to exercise more” moves away from judgment and toward healthy identification of preferences. Stick with the facts here. Instead of “should,” simply describe the circumstances. “I exercised for 20 minutes two days this week. I want to exercise for 30 minutes on three days next week” Stay solution oriented and future oriented. “Shoulds” can also be an indicator that expectations or boundaries have not been assertively communicated (or consequences haven’t been effectively applied) with others or clear goals haven’t been set for yourself.

If you find yourself “shoulding” take the time to write down what you want and make a plan for how to get it. Look at what you can do differently to help things go the way you want them to go. When “shoulds” are applied retroactively, a slightly different approach can be used. Rather than judging the past, focus on the future. “Next time I will...” or “In the future I want to...” This reframes the potential solution, making it less about a harsh judgment and verbal punishment, and more about productive action.

- **Personalization:** Not every mistake is your fault, and even if it is your fault, it doesn’t mean you’re bad, stupid, or incompetent. Personalization begs to differ. This distorted thinking pattern tells you that every misstep is attributable to you as a person; every

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mistake in your life is indicative of some shame-inducing character flaw. It tells us that when you kids misbehave at school, that means we're horrible parents. When we don't get invited to the party, it's because we're worthless. When we get rained on it's because the world hates us. Personalization invites us to take every perceived slight, criticism, or inconvenience as an attack on our humanity. This distortion can also be flipped towards other and generally wreaks havoc on interpersonal relationships. If you assign global characteristics based on isolated behaviors, you're likely to create patterns of judgment and criticism. If forgetting to feed the dog means your partner is an idiot, your relationship is in trouble. If arriving late means your in-laws are inconsiderate and selfish, it's going to be tough to build a positive dynamic with them.

Challenging Personalization: While I encourage everyone to take personal responsibility for their own decisions, challenging personalization requires a clear line to be drawn between what is and isn't your responsibility. More important than taking responsibility only for yourself, is the practice of attributing consequences accurately. What does that mean? It means we all need to practice explaining circumstance, situations, and other people's choice is a way that is not destructive to our own sense of self-worth. Attribute random events (birds pooped on your car, the bus was late, you were cut off in traffic) to the lottery of the universe. No more. No less. Recognize that no one is out to get you. The birds don't hate you. God doesn't hate you. Work to accept the fact that poop happens. Attribute apparent personal attacks appropriately too. When your friend, partner, child, coworker, or some stranger is having a bad day and treating you poorly, it doesn't mean that you're being a horrible person. Assess our own behavior, and make necessary course corrections, but don't assume that their bad day means that you're inadequate. **In concrete terms, describe the situation, validate your emotional experience, resist, refute, or redirect when global label pop up, then take decisive values-based action.**

For example, if I'm not invited to the party...

Rather than beating myself up because I'm clearly a worthless friend that no one wants to be around, I 1) describe the situation (without judgment): I wanted to go to the party and I didn't get invited, 2) validate my experience: I feel hurt, lonely, and rejected...it's painful, 3) take values based action: I value my health and challenges, so I'll take this time to jump on the treadmill. Notice the lack of judgmental name-calling directed at myself or the host of the party.

- **False Permanence:** One sure way to create stress, anxiety, hopelessness, and despair is indulging in the distorted concept of false permanence. This particular pattern often appears as a combination of black-and-white thinking and catastrophizing along with a paralyzing perception of permanence. It's clear how this type of false permanence could lead to emotional discomfort. "Everything is bad and it always will be!" sets you on a clear path to hopelessness and despair. If we eliminate the possibility of change, the current circumstance can never improve; we can never grow; our efforts to initiate change will feel worthless.

Conversely, falsely assuming positive experiences and emotions will remain permanent can also lead to significant distress. "Everything is perfect and always will be!" can set you up to fall hard when changes occur. The lack of psychological flexibility is at the

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core of this distortion. Clinging to any moment with an unwillingness to accept change will result in unnecessary suffering.

Challenging False Permanence: Accept the present moment and embrace the certainty of change. Whether the experience is comfortable or uncomfortable, work to accept it as it is, letting go of expectations (especially judgmental expectations). Mindfulness exercises can help build the skills necessary for nonjudgmental observations. In conjunction with the effort to accept, embrace some version of the mantra “Nothing is forever,” “This too shall pass,” “Change is inevitable,” or “Live for the possibilities of today.” In other words, actively remind yourself that your reality IS NOT permanent. Throughout this process it’s important to be kind and compassionate with yourself, working to avoid other thought distortions, while encouraging yourself and seeking healthy support.

As you challenge this particular pattern, be careful to apply it to only to your mental or emotional experiences. There are certain aspects of life that are permanent. Certain types of loss such as death are permanent, and that is not a distortion. The thoughts and feelings associated with those losses, however, are fluid and ever changing. It can be easy to fall into the trap of connecting the real permanence of death with false permanence of the emotional experience. This comes up with many permanent or mostly-permanent losses – break-ups, job loss, relocations. Even if these changes are permanent, the emotional experience never is. It always changes.

- **Blaming:** This particular distorted thinking pattern is a sneaky one. It infiltrates common language usage on a daily basis. Any time you use “_____ makes me feel _____,” you’re using a form of blame to distance yourself from the emotional experience. “You make me so angry” is a statement that blames someone else for your emotional experience. Blame (like should) carries inherent judgment which can be personally and interpersonally destructive. Blaming others in this way also pushes you away from other people, creating conflict rather than resolution. Blame isn’t just for emotions though.

Blame is an equally damaging distortion when applied to our own behaviors. “They made me do it” is a harmful way to escape the discomfort of personal responsibility; however, if others are in control of how you feel and what you do...the whole world becomes very unpredictable and unstable. If you’re in the habit of blaming other people, or even circumstances, for your emotions and behavior, it creates a mentality that falsely absolves you of personal responsibility and strips your sense of self-efficacy. Blaming, therefore, becomes a backhanded attack on your own capacity to validate your emotions and manage your behaviors. If everyone/everything is always responsible...you can never feel successful.

Blame also paints you into a corner in terms of personal identity. Blame creates a narrative with only one identity – righteous victim. This role can protect you from vulnerability. It can mask feelings of pain and helplessness with righteous anger, but people can also get stuck in that role, remaining hurt, powerless, and angry.

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Challenging Blaming: The simple answer? Stop blaming other people or circumstances for your feelings and conditions. Clearly, the solution is more complex than that, but it's a good place to start. Start by rephrasing the way you express emotions. "That movie made me sad" becomes "I feel sad when I watch movies about true love." Work to be consistent in your expression and start with "I feel _____ when _____." The difference may seem subtle, but the language we use (even in our own heads) has a huge impact on how we experience the world around us. "You make me so mad" becomes "I feel angry when it seems like you're ignoring me." Work to observe your feelings and circumstances without judgment or blame, and look for values-based actions you can take to move toward solutions. Reflect, share, or journal to validate your emotions, and practice acceptance of those emotions without blame. Create a narrative that acknowledges your personal choices as well as your capacity to make different choices moving forward. Choose to build a personal identity consistent with the competent and capable individual that you are, and avoid falling into the "righteous victim" role.

- **Magical Thinking:** Magical Thinking distorts thoughts by shouting "TRUTH!" to the adage, "the grass is always greener..." This type of thinking establishes false hope and wastes energy as people chase after frivolous, empty goals. It often postpones meaningful action and shifts attention away from effectiveness. Happiness or success or some version of those two is perpetually at your fingertips or just an arm's length away. "If I lost 10 pounds I'd be happy." "If I had a new boss, I'd love my job." "If I could just move away for a while, everything would be different." The examples are endless, "If only he would...If only she said...If only they did...If only I was..." In the meantime, while you wait for things and people around you to change, you've remained unhappy and stagnant. Or perhaps you've exhausted yourself trying to make those things happen, only to find that checking that box didn't deliver happiness at all. Finding contentment in life will never be about checking a box, accomplishing a goal, or attaining some external status. Contentment comes from a way of being, an internal shift in how you perceive and experience the world around you. Magical thinking works to convince you of the opposite.

Challenging Magical Thinking: Work with what you have. Remind yourself that contentment is not just around the corner, but can be achieved regardless of the current circumstances, and happiness, just like all emotions is not a permanent destination. Use "if only" as a red-flag that prompts you to rewrite the script. "If only I lost 10lbs, I could be happy with how I look" becomes "My body is amazing just how it is...and I'm setting a goal to eat more vegetables and exercise three days a week. I know that my mind and body feel better when I'm eating a nutritious diet and working out regularly." Success no longer hinges on the external outcome. Allow yourself to be successful in the process, focusing on HOW you work toward a goal rather than arriving at the destination. Acknowledge your efforts in-the-moment and evaluate success based on the way you engage rather than the long-term outcome. "I would have been so happy if only I got an A in that class" changes to "I'm proud of the student I was last term even though I didn't get an A." The focus shifts to how – with commitment, dedication, and effort – rather than what. Magical Thinking takes you out of the present moment, so the challenge is to remain in the present and focus on taking values-based actions...and allow that to be an accomplishment you can celebrate.