

Cognitive Distortions List

Twelve thinking traps, what they sound like, and a question to ask yourself.

1. All-or-nothing thinking

Seeing things in only two boxes, perfect or a failure, with nothing in between.

"I missed one deadline, so I am terrible at my job."

Ask: Is there a middle ground? Where would this really fall on a scale from 0 to 100?

2. Overgeneralizing

Turning one event into a rule for everything, with words like always, never and everyone.

"I did not get the job. I never get anything I want."

Ask: Is it truly always or never? Can I think of one time it went differently?

3. Negative filter

Zooming in on the one bad part and letting everything good fade out.

"The whole evening was ruined because of one awkward comment."

Ask: What am I leaving out? What else happened that I am not counting?

4. Discounting the positive

Brushing off good things as luck, a fluke or no big deal.

"They only said it went well to be nice."

Ask: If a friend did this, would I say it counts? What would change if I let it count?

5. Mind reading

Feeling sure you know what someone else thinks, usually something bad about you, when they have not said it.

"She has not texted back. She must be annoyed with me."

Ask: How do I actually know what they think? What else might be going on for them?

6. Fortune telling

Being sure the future will go badly, as if you have already seen how it ends.

"I will freeze up and embarrass myself at the interview."

Ask: What else could happen? How often have predictions like this come true?

7. Catastrophizing

Jumping to the worst case and treating it as both likely and impossible to cope with.

"If I make a mistake in this meeting, I will lose my job and everything will fall apart."

Ask: What is most likely to happen? If the worst did happen, how would I cope?

8. Emotional reasoning

Treating a feeling as evidence about the facts, as if feeling scared proves there is danger.

"I feel like a burden, so I must be one."

Ask: What are the facts, apart from how I feel? Have my feelings ever been wrong before?

9. Should statements

Strict rules about how you or others should be, followed by guilt or anger when a rule is broken.

"I should be over this by now."

Ask: Who made this rule? How would it sound as a wish instead of a must?

10. Labeling

Summing up a whole person, yourself or someone else, with one harsh word.

"I forgot her birthday. I am such a terrible friend."

Ask: Am I describing what someone did, or judging who they are? What would a fair description be?

11. Personalizing and blaming

Putting all of the responsibility on one person, often yourself, when many things played a part.

"My son is struggling at school. It is all my fault."

Ask: What else played a part? How much of this was really in my control?

12. Unfair comparisons

Measuring yourself against other people's best moments, or an impossible standard, and always coming up short.

"Everyone my age has their life together except me."

Ask: Am I comparing my inside to their outside? Is this a fair comparison?

Catch the Thinking Trap

Name _____ Date _____

1. What happened?

2. What went through my mind?

How much do I believe it? Circle one.

0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
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3. Which thinking traps might it be in? Tick any that fit.

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|---|--|---|
| ☐ All-or-nothing thinking | ☐ Overgeneralizing | ☐ Negative filter |
| ☐ Discounting the positive | ☐ Mind reading | ☐ Fortune telling |
| ☐ Catastrophizing | ☐ Emotional reasoning | ☐ Should statements |
| ☐ Labeling | ☐ Personalizing and blaming | ☐ Unfair comparisons |

4. Questions to ask

What is the evidence for and against it? What would I tell a friend who thought this? What is most likely to happen? Is there a middle ground?

5. A more balanced thought

6. Now, how much do I believe the first thought? Circle one.

0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
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Thinking Traps for Kids

Sometimes our brains play tricks on us. Can you spot the trap?



Light Switch

Your brain only has ON and OFF. Things are perfect or terrible, with no in-between.

"I got one wrong, so the whole test is ruined."



Always-Never Parrot

One thing happens, and a parrot in your head squawks that it will ALWAYS happen or NEVER change.

"Nobody ever picks me."



Gray Glasses

Like wearing gray glasses: you only see the bad part and miss all the good parts.

"Recess was the worst because I tripped once."



Mind Reader

Your brain pretends it can read minds, and it is sure people think bad things about you.

"My teacher thinks I am bad."



Crystal Ball

Your brain looks in a pretend crystal ball and decides something bad is going to happen.

"I am going to hate the new school."



Snowball

A tiny worry rolls downhill and grows into a giant snowball of disaster.

"If I forget my lines in the play, everyone will laugh forever."



Feelings Fog

A big feeling fogs up your view, so you believe whatever the feeling says.

"I feel scared, so it must be dangerous."



Sticky Labels

Sticking a mean name tag on yourself or someone else because of one thing.

"I am dumb."



Blame Spotlight

Shining the blame spotlight on just one person, often you, when lots of things happened.

"Everyone lost the game because of me."

My brain said _____

The trap was _____

A more helpful thought _____