

# Cognitive Distortions

Name the Thoughts that are Getting you Down

## ***Catastrophizing***

When you catastrophize, you imagine that some disaster is imminent. You predict dire consequences from unremarkable occurrences: a small leak in the sailboat means it will surely sink, feeling tired and fatigued often means that you have cancer, a slight downturn in the economy means you'll soon be jobless and out on the street. Like all anxious thoughts, catastrophic thoughts usually start with the words, "What if."

Catastrophizing relies on the overestimation of the odds of a bad outcome as well as an underestimation of your ability to cope should it befall you.

## ***Filtering***

You focus on the negative details while ignoring the positive aspects of a situation. For example, a computer draftsman who was uncomfortable with criticism was praised for the quality of his recent detail drawings and was asked if he could get the next job out a little more quickly. He went home anxious, having decided that his employer thought he was dawdling. He filtered out the praise and focused only on the criticism.

## ***Polarized Thinking***

Things are black or white, good or bad. You have to be perfect or you're a failure. There's no middle ground, no room for mistakes. A single mother with three children was determined to be strong and "in charge." The moment she felt tired or confused, she began thinking of herself as a bad mother and became anxious.

## ***Overgeneralization***

You reach a general conclusion based on a single incident or piece of evidence. You exaggerate the frequency of problems and use negative global labels. This pattern can lead to an increasingly restricted life. If you got sick on a train once, you decide never to take a train again. If you got dizzy on a sixth-floor balcony, you never go out there again. If you felt anxious the last time your husband took a business trip, you imagine you'll be a wreck every time he leaves town. One bad experience means that whenever you're in a similar situation you will inevitably repeat the bad experience. It's easy to see how this could contribute to anxiety. Words such as "always" or "never" are clues to overgeneralized thinking.

## ***Mind Reading***

Without their saying so, you just "know" what people are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, you have certain knowledge of how people think and feel about you. You're afraid to actually check it out with them. You might assume what your boyfriend is thinking and say to yourself, "This close he sees how unattractive I am." You then become anxious because you think he's going to reject you.

### ***Magnifying and Minimizing***

You exaggerate the degree or intensity of a problem. You turn up the volume on anything bad, making it loud, large, and overwhelming. Minor suggestions become scathing criticism. Minor setbacks become cause for despair. Slight obstacle become overwhelming barriers. The flip side of magnifying is minimizing. When you magnify, you view everything negative and difficult in your life through a telescope that magnifies your problems. But when you view your assets, such as your ability to cope and find solutions, you look through the wrong end of the telescope so that everything positive is minimized. This pattern creates a tone of doom and hysterical pessimism, which easily gives way to anxiety.

### ***Personalization***

You assume that everything people do or say is some kind of reaction to you. You also frequently compare yourself to others, trying to determine who is smarter, more competent, better looking, and so on. Because of this, you view your own worth as dependent on how you measure up to others. And you become anxious, worrying about whether you measure up.

### ***Shoulds***

You have a list of ironclad rules about how you and other people should act. People who break the rules anger you, and you feel guilty when you violate the rules. "I should be the perfect friend, parent, teacher, student, or spouse"; "I should know, understand, and foresee everything"; "I should be nice and never display anger"; and "I should never make mistakes" are examples of unrealistic "shoulds." Your personal code of conduct is so demanding that it's impossible to live up to and you make yourself anxious just thinking about it.

Taken from: Coping with Anxiety: 10 Simple Ways to Relieve Anxiety, Fear & Worry by Edmund J. Bourne and Lorna Garano.