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Cognitive Distortions

A cognitive distortion is a thought, specifically a thought pattern, which makes you perceive reality inaccurately. These less-than-accurate perceptions of reality lead you to come to false conclusions, engage in maladaptive behaviours, and experience unpleasant emotions. They also tend to be self-perpetuating and maintain other cognitive distortions that you may be predisposed to use. These distortions may have helped you cope with a challenging world. However, they now persist beyond their welcome.

A constellation of these cognitive distortions will usually explain the reasons behind your behaviours and feelings. Identifying when you use a cognitive distortion and replacing it with a realistic thought will help you address pathological thinking patterns.

Commonly used cognitive distortions.

Dichotomous thinking: Sometimes termed as "polarised thinking" or "all or nothing thinking," dichotomous thinking forces you to ignore the continuum and force-fit things into two extreme categories. All-or-nothing thinking is similar to "splitting," which is a defence mechanism. For example, you may feel a person is either "only good" or "only bad". You may ignore this individual's complexities and label them harshly. In other words, everything appears black or white to you. And you choose to ignore shades of grey.

Fortune telling and catastrophising: Unlike the feel-good predictions of a fortune teller, psychological fortune-telling is a cognitive distortion that leads to anxiety and depression. You may predict negative outcomes and believe everything is going to go wrong. In its more intense form, fortune-telling makes you believe in catastrophes you predict. For example: "Nobody will ever love me because I do crazy things". In its more extreme form, you may catastrophise and think, "I am unlovable, and I will be abandoned forever".

Discounting the positive: You ignore every positive aspect of a situation or person and focus only on the negative qualities. You may convince yourself that the positive aspects don't really count as the dealbreakers are more significant. You may magnify negative attributes (magnification) while minimising the positives. For example: "My presentation sucked, and everyone probably thinks poorly of me" (instead of acknowledging the fact that you prepared the slides, showed up, and presented in front of an audience).

Emotional reasoning: Believing in biased thoughts and coming to conclusions when a certain emotion overpowers your mind. For example: "I feel sad. Hence, my life in general is sad too."

Labelling: You assign overarching global labels to yourself, others, and certain situations. For example: "This world is sick," "My life is meaningless," "She is a terrible mother."

Selective abstraction: You focus on a single detail while actively ignoring the larger picture. This cognitive distortion is also known as "tunnel vision". For example: "My face is ugly because I have nose-to-lip lines. I don't care that my features are attractive or that my skin is supple and smooth."

Mind reading: You believe you can know what the other person is thinking or feeling, without having substantial evidence. You may also believe others can read your mind or know how you're feeling. For example: "Everyone knows I am anxious because I did not present properly," "He knew how I feel about this matter, but still did something that I dislike."

Personalising: You think people always say or do things as a reaction to your personal qualities. In reality, they may not even be thinking about you. For example: "The receptionist did not smile at me because of the way I look," "My husband did not have dinner with me because of something I did."

Overgeneralisation: You choose aspects of a situation or a person, and extend them to unrelated things. This results in the chosen aspect being generalised widely. For example: "I always make mistakes when I speak," "People never pay attention to me," "Life, in general, is difficult."

Should and must statements: You often use "should," "must," and "have to" when describing situations or people. This presupposes how things should be, while that is not always the case. For example: "I must always help people," "I should never make a mistake," "I have to achieve X to be happy."

Jumping to conclusions: You quickly come to conclusions without considering available evidence, whether positive or negative. You may arrive at those conclusions based on prior experience and biased reasoning. For example: "His eyes seemed like he hated me," "I saw my husband texting someone. So he must be cheating on me."

Blaming: You may refuse to take responsibility for your thoughts, actions and feelings, and blame others for various situations you may find yourself in, including your internal state. On the other hand, you may absolve others from accountability and blame yourself for everything that goes wrong. For example: "My mother is the reason for all my troubles," "It's my responsibility to make sure everyone is happy."

Comparing: You may compare yourself with others who do not share your realities and difficulties. For example: "He is taller and more attractive than I am," "I'll never be loved as much as my sister."

Magical thinking: You believe that your thoughts, emotions, or actions can influence unrelated outcomes. For example: "I thought of him today, so he may visit me," "I have a bad feeling that things will go wrong, and they will."

Note: *We all use cognitive distortions, and we are hardwired to be biased and prejudiced about many things in life. However, with consistent efforts, self-reflection, and deeper awareness, each of us can reduce unpleasant feelings and minimise maladaptive behaviours.*