

Styles of Distorted Thinking

1. **Filtering:** You take the negative details and magnify them while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation.
2. **Polarized Thinking:** Things are black or white, good or bad. You have to be perfect or you're a failure. There is no middle ground.
3. **Overgeneralization:** You come to a general conclusion based on a single incident or piece of evidence. If something bad happens once, you expect it to happen over and over again.
4. **Mind Reading:** Without their saying so, you know what people are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, you are able to divine how people are feeling toward you.
5. **Catastrophizing:** You expect disaster. You notice or hear about a problem and start "what ifs. What if tragedy strikes? What if it happens to you?"
6. **Personalization:** Thinking that everything people do or say is some kind of reaction to you. You also compare yourself to others, trying to determine who's smarter, better looking etc.
7. **Control Fallacies:** If you feel externally controlled, you see yourself as helpless, a victim of fate. The fallacy of internal control has you responsible for the pain and happiness of everyone around you.
8. **Fallacy of Fairness:** You feel resentful because you think you know what's fair but other people won't agree with you.
9. **Blaming:** You hold other people responsible for your pain, or take the other tack and blame yourself for every problem or reversal.
10. **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 if you violate the rules.
11. **Emotional Reasoning:** You believe that what you feel must be true – automatically. If you *feel* stupid and boring, then you must *be* stupid and boring.
12. **Fallacy of Change:** You expect that other people will change to suit you if you just pressure or cajole them enough. You need to change people because our hopes for happiness seem to depend entirely on them.
13. **Global Labelling:** You generalize one or two qualities into a negative global judgment.
14. **Being Right:** You are continually on trial to prove that your opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and you will go to any length to demonstrate your rightness.
15. **Heaven's Reward Fallacy:** You expect all your sacrifice and self-denial to pay off, as if there were someone keeping score. You feel bitter when the reward doesn't come.

Learning to Caringly Challenge Yourself

Evidence

- Is this belief factually correct or incorrect?
- What is the evidence for this belief?
- Is this belief accurate?

Alternatives

- There are usually multiple causes for any single event so it makes no sense to only think about the most negative reasons.
- Is there a less destructive way of thinking about this?
- Scan for all possible contributing causes
- Focus on the **changeable** causes (i.e. didn't spend enough time studying)
- Focus on the **specific** causes (i.e. this exam was uncharacteristically hard)
- Focus on the **nonpersonal** causes (i.e. the professor graded these papers much harder relative to other assignments)
- Avoid focussing on causes that are permanent, pervasive and personal.

Implications

- If the negative belief turns out to be true, it is important to focus on decatastrophizing.
- If the belief is true, ask yourself, "What are the implications?"
- How likely are these implications?
- Realistically assess the likelihood of implications you think about using evidence.

Usefulness

- The consequences of holding a belief sometimes matter more than the truth of the belief (i.e. believing that the world should be fair ensures that you will be disappointed, so why dwell on this?)
- It can be destructive to focus on a belief if its consequence is to cause you to feel badly about yourself.
- The important question may be not "Is the belief true?" but "It is functional for me to think this right now?"
- If it's not useful to think this way now, it is important to distract yourself with tasks at hand – to simply get on with your day (behaviour change results in thought and feeling change).
- Another strategy is to detail all the ways you can change the situation in the future. Even if the belief is true, is it changeable? How can you go about changing it?

Adapted from: Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life
Seligman, M.E.P. (1998)
New York: Simon & Schuster