

Emotional Management Tools: Identifying Cognitive Distortions

Feelings are not Facts

**Just because you *think* something, (example: “I’m stupid”) doesn’t make it true.
Just because you *feel* something (example: feel like a failure) doesn’t make it factual.**

Cognitive means thoughts. *Distortion* refers to twisted, not normal. The term *cognitive distortions* refers to *thoughts* that are *not true*, are twisted or false. Your distorted thoughts will *feel real*. The human body is designed to connect thoughts and emotions—regardless of whether or not those thoughts are true. If you imagine a chain saw murderer outside your window—the goosebumps on your arm are real. When your mind creates a love affair with your favorite movie star, your tingling sensations are real. Emotional responses in your body are not proof that the thoughts causing the sensations are true. The children’s story featuring Chicken Little provides a nice example of a cognitive distortion. When an acorn fell on Chicken Little’s head, the startled and frightened chick *exaggerated, assumed* and quickly *jumped to a conclusion* that predicted doom and gloom by crying out “*the sky is falling, the sky is falling?!!*” Chicken Little believed the sky was falling. That was not a lie. That was a *thought distortion*.

Thoughts and feelings do not always mean something is true or real.

Reality checks help transform exaggerated, distorted and pessimistic emotional reactions into more realistic, grounded and solution-focused actions. Take a moment to reflect on the situations or events that routinely trigger your most distressing emotional reactions.

- What sets off your distress?
- What triggers your guilt, insecurity, doubt, worry or depression?
- When do you feel jealous, irritated, annoyed or angry?

True verses distorted thoughts: Evaluate whether or not your emotions are triggered by thoughts related to real, factual and measurable events. (*Examples: Divorce papers served, medical results conclusive, pink slip received, or employee evaluation documented*). Notice when your emotions are triggered by assumptions, exaggerations or by time-travel “what if” worries about future events that may or may not occur. (*What if they don’t like me? What if I mess up? What if I get sick? I am afraid I will never be good enough to.....*)

If your thoughts and emotions are not based on present reality, you have created a *cognitive distortion*. False beliefs are called *distorted thoughts*. *David Burns MD identified 12 common thought distortions. Take your own inventory on the next page to see how many thought distortions cause you stress.

David Burns M.D. is a psychiatrist bestselling author of self-help books about overcoming panic and anxiety. Check out his website for tools and resources at www.feelinggood.com

Identifying Cognitive Distortions— 12 Distorted Thoughts Inventory

Author: David Burns M.D.

Check the items below to identify patterns in your thinking that may be distorted, twisted and therefore, untrue.

- 1. Filtering.** Magnify the negative, filter out the positive. *One criticism overshadows 100 compliments. Noticing the mistakes instead of highlighting the accuracy.*
- 2. Polarized Thinking (or “Black and White” or “All or Nothing” thinking).** No middle ground. When your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure. *You give 100% or give up. Change everything or change nothing. Your home is either clean or a pig sty. Relationships vacillate between “I loved you, now I hate you.”*
- 3. Overgeneralization.** If something bad happens only once, you expect it to happen over and over again. *Experience one defeat, believe you will always lose.*
- 4. Jumping to Conclusions.** Assumptions without facts. *“They are late, they must be dead!”*
- 5. Catastrophizing. Expect disaster:** *This is the worst day ever! I’ll die of embarrassment!*
- 6. Personalization.** Everything others do or say is about you. *“You are in a bad mood, what did I do?” “If you loved me, you would not do that!” “You didn’t text back, you must not like me.”*
- 7. Control Fallacies.** See self as either victim (*I had no choice*) or at fault (*must be about me*).
- 8. Blaming.** Holding other people responsible for causing your feelings or actions.
- 9. Shoulds.** Using “should” to motivate with punishment or criticism, creating guilt and shame. *“I should have known better.” “I shouldn’t have to tell you how I feel.”*
- 10. Emotional Reasoning.** *“I feel it, therefore it must be true.”* If you feel stupid and boring, then you must be stupid and boring.
- 11. Fallacy of Change.** We expect that other people will change to suit us if we just pressure them. *“If I complain enough or remind them enough....they will change.”*
- 12. Always Being Right.** Being right is more important than being kind. Would rather *win* an argument than mend the relationship, build intimacy or acknowledge feelings.

Not sure if your thoughts are distorted? Ask yourself these questions:

1. What is actually true right now? (*Example: measurable or observable facts in current time*)
2. How would you view this situation if it were happening to your friend?
3. How would you advise someone else who was experiencing a situation such as this?
4. What is your intention, goal or desired outcome?
5. How could you cope and problem-solve to become a role model in this situation?

Taking Responsibility

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy teaches you to become aware of & take responsibility for your thoughts, emotions and actions.

- **Emotional Intelligence** reflects your ability to accurately identify your emotions.
- **Emotional Self-Regulation** refers to the ability to manage your emotions. The key to managing your emotions is to learn to align your thoughts and actions with your goals/values.

You may not always choose what happens to you (criticism, injustice, betrayal, hardship, crime, violence, accidents/injury or loss) And you may not always choose how you feel (fearful, angry, guilty, sad, insecure or lonely) **but you always choose your response.**

Stimulus: Acknowledge what is happening inside of you and around you.

Internal = your own feelings & thoughts
External = other people & events

Examples:

Stress/anxiety/depression
 Change & Challenges
 Criticism/guilt/shame
 Arguments/conflict/Anger
 Verbal abuse
 Bullying/intimidation
 Injustice/unfairness
 Betrayal
 Abandonment
 Accidents/Illness/Injury
 Divorce/Loss
 Crime/Violence
 Death

**You
 have
 A
 choice**

**“Responsible”
 means:
 You are
 ABLE to
 CHOOSE
 Your
 Response.**

**What
 is
 your
 intention?**

Response
What do you choose?

Destructive Blame/Anger/Rage
 Feeling stuck in blame, anger, and resentment. Pointing fingers outward— waiting for “them” to change.

Wounded/Victim/Martyr
 Comparing, competing, criticizing, complaining. Feeling stuck, helpless, inferior, worried and afraid. Waiting to be rescued, helped or saved.

Avoid/Deny/Escape with bad habits and self-defeating behaviors
 Quick fixes/denial & avoidance
Excessive social media, working, eating, cleaning, spending, clutter, gambling, porn, **unhealthy relationships**— (obsessing about other people) gossip, affairs, domestic violence, smoking/drinking/drug abuse.

Choose Dignity & Self-Respect: Align thoughts & actions with values

- Choose healthy coping skills.
- Problem solve
- Role model: Lead by example
- Be the change you seek

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

Viktor Emil Frankl, M.D., Ph.D. (26 March 1905 – 2 September 1997) was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor and author of *Man's Search for Meaning*

“It’s hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head”
Sally Kempton

Emotional Management Tool: Cognitive Reframing

Taking responsibility for changing your distorted thoughts with cognitive reframing tools

The power tool for changing those blaming, wounded, self-defeating thoughts and emotions into more goal directed, positive thoughts and emotions is called *cognitive reframing*. Cognitive reframing requires taking responsibility for your thoughts. Cognitive reframing means *challenging* those untrue, exaggerated and distorted thoughts by *changing them* into more helpful and useful thoughts. Cognitive reframing is like an attitude adjustment. Let’s put a little altitude in your attitude!

Practice problem solving rather than distorting, blaming or complaining.

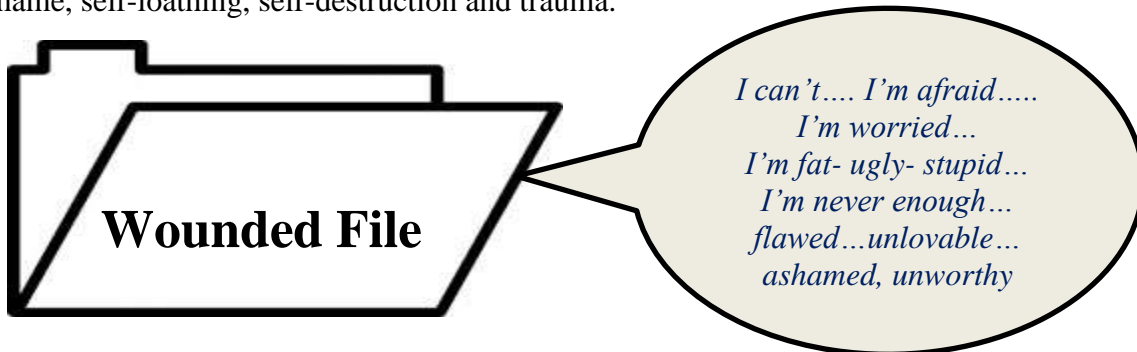
Your cognitive reframing tool is quite simple: **You coach yourself through stress, emotional pain and life’s difficulties with exactly the same wisdom and compassion that you use to coach your friends and your loved ones.** Your self-coaching will follow the three steps of emotional healing:

1. **Acknowledge** your thoughts and emotions
2. **Learn** to cope by replacing self-defeating thoughts or behaviors with healthier, more goal directed and positive responses.
3. **Let go** of old patterns by repeating the new thoughts and actions until they become who you are. Fake it until you believe it!

1. Acknowledge: Tune into your own emotions, thoughts & problems. You can only fix what you are aware of. Let yourself become fully aware of ALL OF YOUR THOUGHTS. *Yes, even those negative, fearful, angry and uncomfortable thoughts.* Think of your brain as a computer, then notice what thoughts and images show up on your monitor. Your negative, painful, uncomfortable thoughts are stored in a file within your computer brain. The name of this file is your **wounded file**.

Your Wounded File

Your wounded file functions like a virus in your computer brain. This file spreads destructive coding that messes up your mood, sabotages relationships and undermines your success. The file is filled with self-doubt, guilt, fear, jealousy, insecurity, anger, feelings of unworthiness, shame, self-loathing, self-destruction and trauma.



Question: *“I understand the concept of negative-distorted thoughts polluting my brain and causing problems in my life, but how do I delete my wounded file when I have been thinking those distorted thoughts my whole life?”*
Isabella

Answer: Struggling with change is normal. It is easier to repeat familiar, negative thoughts and behaviors than it is to challenge or change them. But just because something is easy or familiar, does not make it right. Just because you have thought something your whole life does not mean it is right to believe it your whole life plus one more day. **Reframing requires that you believe in the changes you are about to make. Change is successful when you believe it’s the right thing to do.** Ask yourself if you believe that you are right to repeat those negative, pessimistic thoughts. What type of role model do you want to be?

Try this: Focus on the word in the box below. What’s wrong? What’s missing?

BEFOR

If you answered, *“the word in the box is missing the letter e,”* you are correct. Now what if, in response to your correction, I say *“But that’s how I spell it! I have never added an e. It’s hard to start spelling it differently after all these years!”*

You might say, *“I am sorry, but the fact is that “before” really does end in “e.” Just because you have spelled it incorrectly your whole life, does not change the fact that the correct spelling ends with an “e”.*

Reframing your thoughts is like editing. If your whole life you thought it was okay to tell yourself that you are *“stupid, fat, ugly, lazy, or not good enough”*...this history does not make your thoughts correct or healthy. Just because you *“always did it”* does not mean it is true or the right thing to do. Editing takes time. It is hard work. It is easier *not* to make corrections. Once you acknowledge that you need a correction, do you still make excuses for repeating the error?

***Before, when your thoughts were negative and pessimistic, you did not know better.
 The truth is, today you do know better.***

Today you understand that you have a right and a responsibility to edit or delete the negative thoughts and actions interfering with your goals, your dreams and your spirit. Your efforts to heal and grow contribute to your status as a role model. It is never too late to become a positive role model. No matter what happened *before*, today you have a new opportunity...if you decide to take it. I am not asking you to live in denial about your past or about what you used to think, do or say. But I do invite you to consider:

“Positive Denial: I don’t deny what happened. I simply deny it’s power over me today.”
Marianne Williamson

Are you ready to delete your wounded file? Action speaks louder than words. Let’s do an exercise that walks you through the steps of acknowledging, then challenging and changing those negative thoughts such as guilt, fear, anger, jealousy, insecurity, regret and self-loathing.

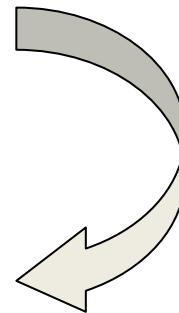
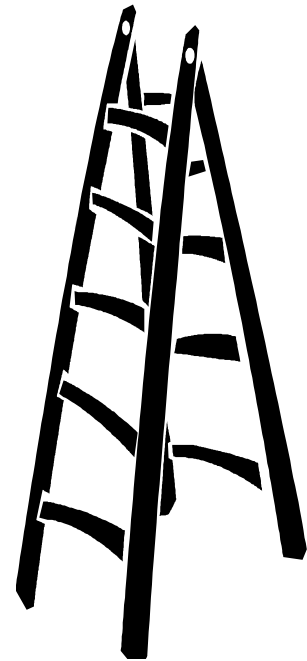
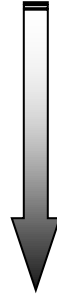
Emotional Management Tool: Cognitive Reframing Self-talk Ladder A tool for transforming your thoughts

Turn your attention inward. Imagine each of your thoughts as a rung on a ladder. Listen to each thought carefully. Your negative, self-defeating thoughts move down the ladder. Notice how these thoughts impact your emotions.

Your negative thoughts pull you downward like the rungs on a ladder descending into your emotionally wounded file.

Step 1. Acknowledge. Check which thoughts below sound or feel familiar to you.

- "I will never be good enough."*
- "I'm not like everyone else."*
- "I'm fat, ugly and stupid."*
- "I'm too old and too tired to change."*
- "No one will ever love me."*
- "I'm stuck."*
- "I'm afraid they wouldn't like me."*
- "No matter what I try, things never work out."*
- "I am always worried about what they think."*
- "I can't forget and move on."*
- "Mistakes are unacceptable, I must be perfect."*
- "I can't trust anyone."*
- "Why bother? What's the point?"*
- "I'm afraid they'll find out that I am an imposter, a fake."*
- "I'm a failure."*
- "I hate my life."*
- "I'm not worthy."*
- "I feel guilty."*
- "I hate myself."*



Thoughts, like ladders, move up and down. Your choice.

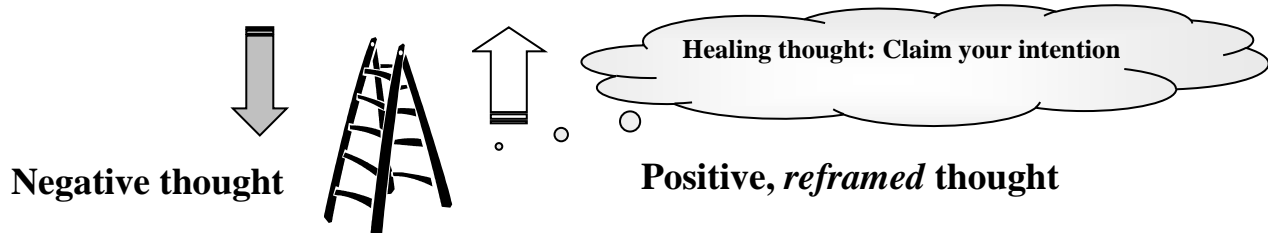
As you imagine your thoughts as rungs on a ladder, the positive thoughts lead up the ladder, away from your wounded file. Positive thoughts bring hope, optimism and healing. Positive thoughts help you cope, problem-solve and maintain your dignity. You can choose to transform your negative thoughts into healing thoughts with *cognitive reframing*. **Speak to yourself with that same wise and compassionate voice that you use when advising, counseling and coaching your loved ones.** Use the steps below to coach yourself.

Step 2. Learn: Challenge and reframe your negative thoughts:

1. Reality check: Is this true? Challenge your thought. This may be a lie that you have been telling yourself. Investigate, research and fact check. Just because you think it, doesn't make it true.

2. What is your intention? Do your thoughts have any positive function? Take responsibility.

3. Reframe: Respond to your negative thought as you would when comforting a friend or beloved. The success of your reframing will be evident in your improved mood, attitude and outlook. **Successfully reframed thoughts allow you to live the advice you give others.**



- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm fat, ugly, stupid. • I'm not good enough. • I feel guilty. • I am afraid they won't like me. • I am alone. • I am stuck. • I must be perfect. • I can't trust. • I'm not worthy. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>So what?! Even fat, ugly, stupid people can make the world a better place! LOL. I will focus on being a good person.</i> • <i>Good enough for who? For what? This isn't even logical.</i> • <i>Guilt is the feeling good people have when they behave badly. I will learn from mistakes, then forgive myself and move on.</i> • <i>I can't expect EVERYONE to like me. That's unrealistic. Rather than live in fear of rejection, I will focus on self-respect.</i> • <i>When I am alone, I'm with myself. I am in good company.</i> • <i>There has to be an answer. I will google it!</i> • <i>As a child, I thought perfection would protect me. I am safe now. I don't need to be perfect, I choose to be human.</i> • <i>Trust is not about other people. It's about believing I can handle whatever happens. Trust starts within me.</i> • <i>Worthy of what? To whom? I decide my worth. Feeling unworthy serves no useful purpose. I refuse to devalue myself again.</i> |
|--|--|



Wounded File

