

# Thinking About Thinking

## Patterns of Cognitive Distortions:

These are 10 common cognitive distortions that can contribute to negative emotions. They also fuel catastrophic thinking patterns that are particularly disabling. Read these and see if you can identify ones that are familiar to you.

**1. All-or-Nothing Thinking:** You see things in black-or-white categories. If a situation falls short of perfect, you see it as a total failure. When a young woman on a diet ate a spoonful of ice cream, she told herself, "I've blown my diet completely." This thought upset her so much that she gobbled down an entire quart of ice cream!

**2. Over generalization:** You see a single negative event, such as a romantic rejection or a career reversal, as a never-ending pattern of defeat by using words such as "always" or "never" when you think about it. A depressed salesman became terribly upset when he noticed bird dung on the windshield of his car. He told himself, "Just my luck! Birds are *a/ways* crapping on my car!"

**3. Mental Filter:** You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively, so that your vision of all reality becomes darkened, like the drop of ink that discolors a beaker of water. Example: You receive many positive comments about your presentation to a group of associates at work, but one of them says something mildly critical. You obsess about his reaction for days and ignore all the positive feedback.

**4. Discounting the Positive:** You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count." If you do a good job, you may tell yourself that it wasn't good enough or that anyone could have done as well. Discounting the positive takes the joy out of life and makes you feel inadequate and unrewarded.

**5. Jumping to Conclusions:** You interpret things negatively when there are no facts to support your conclusion.

**Mind Reading:** Without checking it out, you arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you.

**Fortune-telling:** You predict that things will turn out badly. Before a test you may tell yourself, "I'm really going to blow it. What if I flunk?" If you're depressed you may tell yourself, "I'll never get better."

**6. Magnification:** You exaggerate the importance of your problems and shortcomings, or you minimize the importance of your desirable qualities. This is also called the "binocular trick."

**7. Emotional Reasoning:** You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: "I feel terrified about going on airplanes. It must be very dangerous to fly." Or "I feel guilty. I must be a rotten person." Or "I feel angry. This proves I'm being treated unfairly." Or "I feel so inferior. This means I'm a second-rate person." Or "I feel hopeless. I must really be hopeless."

## Thinking About Thinking (continued)

**8. “Should statements”:** You tell yourself that things *should* be the way you hoped or expected them to be. After playing a difficult piece on the piano, a gifted pianist told herself, “I shouldn’t have made so many mistakes.” This made her feel so disgusted that she quit practicing for several days. “Musts,” “oughts” and “have tos” are similar offenders.

“Should statements” that are directed against yourself lead to guilt and frustration. Should statements that are directed against other people or the world in general lead to anger and frustration: “He shouldn’t be so stubborn and argumentative.”

Many people try to motivate themselves with should and shouldn’ts, as if they were delinquents who had to be punished before they could be expected to do anything. “I shouldn’t eat that doughnut.” This usually doesn’t work because all these should and musts make you feel rebellious and you get the urge to do just the opposite. Dr. Albert Ellis has called this “*musterbation*.” I call it the “shouldy” approach to life.

**9. Labeling:** Labeling is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. Instead of saying “I made a mistake,” you attach a negative label to yourself: “I’m a loser.” You might also label yourself “a fool” or “a failure” or “a jerk.” Labeling is quite irrational because you are not the same as what you do. Human beings exist, but “fools,” “losers,” and “jerks” do not. These labels are just useless abstractions that lead to anger, anxiety, frustration, and low self-esteem.

You may also label others. When someone does something that rubs you the wrong way, you may tell yourself: “He’s an S.O.B.” Then you feel that the problem is with that person’s “character” or “essence” instead of with their thinking or behavior. You see them as totally bad. This makes you feel hostile and hopeless about improving things and leaves little room for constructive communication.

**10. Personalization and blame:** Personalization occurs when you hold yourself personally responsible for an event that isn’t entirely under your control. When a woman received a note that her child was having difficulties at school, she told herself, “This shows what a bad mother I am,” instead of trying to pinpoint the cause of the problem so that she could be helpful to her child. When another woman’s husband beat her, she told herself, “If only I were better in bed, he wouldn’t beat me.” Personalization leads to guilt, shame, and feelings of inadequacy.

Some people do the opposite. They blame other people or their circumstances for their problems, and they overlook ways that they might be contributing to the problem: “The reason my marriage is so lousy is because my spouse is totally unreasonable.” Blame usually doesn’t work very well because other people will resent being scapegoated and they will just toss the blame right back in your lap. It’s like the game of hot potato – no one wants to get stuck with it.

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Burns D. (1989). *The Feeling Good Handbook*. Harper-Collins Publishers. New York.

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*How to Change  
the Way You Feel:  
The Four Steps to Happiness*

Let's assume you want to change the way you feel. First you will need a pen or pencil. It's far better to confront your problems by writing them down than by simply thinking them through. I can't emphasize the importance of this enough, if you want positive changes in your life! You can jot down your negative thoughts whenever you feel upset—in your office, at home, on a plane or bus. Once you get in the habit, you will see in black and white just how unrealistic they are.

Many people will tell themselves, "I'll just read this book and try to think things through a little better and that will be enough." This is a real trap. When you're upset, your negative thoughts will chase each other around in your mind in endless circles. Once you get them down on paper, you develop a more objective perspective. As you read the following pages, try the techniques I describe, even if you're convinced they won't work for you. I think you'll be surprised to discover how helpful they can be.

There are four steps to becoming a happier person.

## THE DAILY MOOD LOG\*

**STEP ONE: DESCRIBE THE UPSETTING EVENT** \_\_\_\_\_

**STEP TWO: RECORD YOUR NEGATIVE FEELINGS**—and rate each one from 0 (the least) to 100 (the most). Use words like sad, anxious, angry, guilty, lonely, hopeless, frustrated, etc.

Emotion	Rating	Emotion	Rating	Emotion	Rating
1.		3.		5.	
2.		4.		6.	

### STEP THREE: THE TRIPLE-COLUMN TECHNIQUE—

<b>Automatic Thoughts</b>	<b>Distortions</b>	<b>Rational Responses</b>
Write your negative thoughts and estimate your belief in each one (0–100).	Identify the distortions in each Automatic Thought.	Substitute more realistic thoughts and estimate your belief in each one (0–100).

(Continue on next page)

### THE DAILY MOOD LOG\* (continued)

Automatic Thoughts	Distortions	Rational Responses

**STEP FOUR: OUTCOME**—Re-rate your belief in each Automatic Thought from 0 to 100 and put a check in the box that describes how you now feel:

☐ not at all better   ☐ somewhat better   ☐ quite a bit better   ☐ a lot better

#### CHECKLIST OF COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS\*

1. All-or-nothing thinking: You look at things in absolute, black-and-white categories.
2. Overgeneralization: You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.
3. Mental filter: You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives.
4. Discounting the positives: You insist that your accomplishments or positive qualities "don't count."
5. Jumping to conclusions: (A) Mind reading—you assume that people are reacting negatively to you when there's no definite evidence for this; (B) Fortune-telling—you arbitrarily predict that things will turn out badly.
6. Magnification or minimization: You blow things way up out of proportion or you shrink their importance inappropriately.
7. Emotional reasoning: You reason from how you feel: "I *feel* like an idiot, so I really must be one." Or "I don't *feel* like doing this, so I'll put it off."
8. "Should statements": You criticize yourself or other people with "shoulds" or "shouldn'ts." "Musts," "oughts," and "have tos" are similar offenders.
9. Labeling: You identify with your shortcomings. Instead of saying "I made a mistake," you tell yourself, "I'm a jerk," or "a fool," or "a loser."
10. Personalization and blame: You blame yourself for something you weren't entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook ways that your own attitudes and behavior might contribute to a problem.

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# Perfectionism—The Foe of Happiness

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The demands of education and occupation appear to be increasing. Performance standards in any given arena are becoming more competitive. In response to increasing stressors, many turn to perfectionism, believing such an approach will ensure success and shield oneself from failure.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Ambitious individuals tend to label themselves “perfectionists,” and many wear this identity as a badge of honor. Rendering perfectionism this positive connotation can conceal larger, more deep-seated issues. A distinction must be made between the “pursuit of excellence” and perfectionism.<sup>7</sup> Working hard or pushing oneself relentlessly to achieve a goal is the sign of a dedicated individual, not necessarily perfectionism. In most cases, perfectionism has its origins in anxiety or self-esteem issues, which themselves have been linked to less personal satisfaction and an increased risk of suicide.<sup>7,9</sup> Perfectionists have a higher risk of eating disorders, anxiety disorders, and depression.<sup>5</sup> The life of one who strives to be ‘perfect’ is riddled with fear and extreme caution. Creativity, joy, inspiration, and even productivity are throttled when perfection is the only option. Ironically, according to Flett and colleagues,<sup>5</sup> successful people actually are less likely to be perfectionists, as the symptoms of perfectionism are more likely to thwart higher levels of success one might achieve.<sup>2,7</sup>

Many of us try to attain perfection. We try to cultivate (or at least project) perfect marriages, and yes, we strive to perform perfect surgical procedures, even though we may know that perfection is an illusion. Yet, we all have tales of surgeons spending more than 6 hours in an operating room attempting to achieve the “perfect” fracture reduction in a case that typically requires a fraction of the time.

In a vocation as demanding as orthopaedic surgery, perfectionism can sap a surgeon’s energy—leaving little room for self-care and relationships. Perfectionists tend to overcommit themselves, and are generally exceedingly sensitive to criticism. They procrastinate, waiting for the ‘perfect’ time to attend to tasks.<sup>5</sup> For the surgeon, challenging cases may be deferred. Cases that an average surgeon could readily handle on a given day are often referred elsewhere. Instead of doing five excellent procedures, the

perfectionist surgeon may spend hours trying to produce the “perfect reduction” in a case that usually requires about one hour of manipulation.

In essence, perfectionists simply fear imperfection, and equate any error with personal defectiveness. They lead their lives convinced that perfection is the only means to self-acceptance.<sup>6</sup>

## Origins of Perfectionism

Beneath perfectionism usually lies a self-esteem issue. During formation, the perfectionist likely received messages of conditional acceptance from a significant caretaker, usually a parent.<sup>6</sup> The message was interpreted loud and clear: “I will love you if ...” The demands for academic, behavioral, or athletic perfection from a parent can forge a wounded self-image in a child. The presence of affectionless and over controlling parental figures, coupled with a tendency for neuroticism have been found as common denominators in the childhood of perfectionists.<sup>10</sup> Our childhood experiences, in addition to some genetic influences, largely determines the burden of intrusive thinking we each experience. The pressure to perform generates dysfunctional thoughts in the young mind and will linger for the remainder of their lives, unless recognition of distorted thought patterns are recognized and addressed.

## Cognitive Distortions

Clearly, perfectionism is a byproduct of dysfunctional and distorted thinking. Cognitive behavioral psychologists have characterized faulty, inaccurate thinking into several cognitive distortions or patterns of erroneous thoughts.<sup>1</sup> Each “cognitive distortion” is merely a lie our brain sends to our conscious mind. Common distortions include ignoring the positive whereupon one’s mind is prepossessed with thoughts of all that is wrong with a particular situation, rather than positive aspects of a given occurrence. For example, a preoccupation of the one errant screw in an otherwise superb fracture reduction is a classic example of ignoring the positive. A distortion commonly found in perfectionists is all-or-nothing thinking. That is, one negative event may trigger a cascade of intrusive thoughts which generalize misfortune

into all aspects of one's life. For instance, a difficult surgery to the perfectionist may generate a stream of negative thoughts along the lines of "I am no good," "I am a lousy surgeon," or even "I don't deserve to be called orthopedic surgeon." Even when a perfectionist achieves success, they do not experience the delight of the accomplishment. Instead, there is only relief that this time they did not fail.

Perfectionists also are prone to several other patterns of distorted thinking including personalization and blame—the tendency to blame oneself for something he or she was not entirely responsible for. Another is labeling, whereby one tends to base his or her entire identity on their shortcomings. Instead of acknowledging a mistake, 'labelers' are quick to identify themselves as "losers" or abject failures. Perfectionists may experience as many as 10 common thought distortions, which all lead to diminished personal happiness and joy (Table 1).

The recognition and awareness of these distorted thoughts is the beginning of the road to recovery. Create space with perfectionistic thoughts by observing them and not *becoming* them. When they arise, simply breathe and let these intrusive thoughts pass. Recognize that perfectionistic thoughts and perfection-driven emotional movements are lies that your mind is presenting to you. The compulsions and neurotic movements that distorted perfectionistic thoughts are to be observed as simply tricks your mind is playing. Much has been written on mindfulness, or living in the moment.<sup>8</sup> When we are entirely present, intrusive and compulsive thinking wanes.

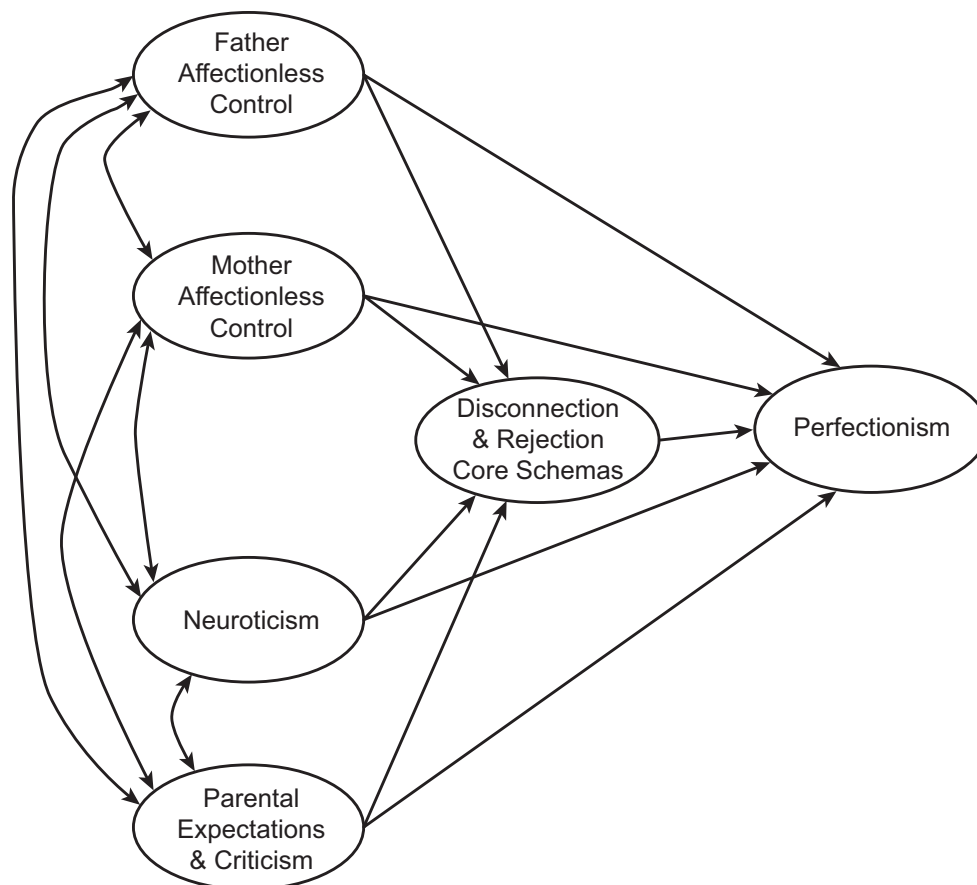
Reading books and attending courses on mindfulness, coupled with daily practice, will yield great benefits in managing our minds.

### Recovery: Courage to Accept Imperfection

Recovery from perfection requires an overhaul of improper thinking which may take some considerable time. In his 2008 study, psychologist and marriage and family therapist Thomas S. Greenspon PhD proposes "building an environment of acceptance" through self-empathy, encouragement, self-reflection, and dialogue.<sup>7</sup> These are not steps, Greenspon argues, but rather elements of an approach that will help an individual move beyond thoughts of perfectionism.

"Perfectionism, in this approach, is seen as a self-esteem issue arising from emotional convictions about what one must do to be acceptable as a person," Greenspon writes in the study. "It reflects a perfectionistic person's basic sense of reality, not simply a set of irrational beliefs that can be changed by deciding to think differently. There is a great deal at stake emotionally, for which perfectionism is a defense. Overcoming perfectionism is a recovery process, more like nurturing a flower's bloom than like fixing a broken object."<sup>7</sup>

Obviously recovery can be hastened with the help of a therapist, and cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown to be especially effective.<sup>4</sup> A trained therapist can help examine thoughts that evoke anxiety and fear and reframe them into more realistic cognitions. In addition, seeking a mentor who has the right balance of self-compassion and acceptance



may serve as highly effective patterning for one's life. An appreciation that others will accept us more fully when we are authentic and real, rather than a "perfect" pseudoself that our minds have constructed out of fear, may help us become more tolerant of ourselves.

### Suggestions to Overcome Perfectionism

1. In the words of David Burns MD:<sup>1</sup> "Dare to be average" for the next 30 days. Accept that you are imperfect and resist the temptation to give into fear. Just *be*, and reconnect with your creative self. Let inspiration and passion rule rather than "shoulds."
2. Make a list of pros and cons on a piece of paper about your perfectionism. Burns uses this exercise to convince his patients that they are less productive when perfectionism takes hold.<sup>1</sup>
3. Another tactic Dr. Burns recommends is to become more "process oriented" rather than results oriented.<sup>1</sup> For example, focus on a good consistent effort in the operating room and release the compulsion to attain the perfect surgery. Implicit with a process orientation is the setting of realistic time limits to each task. Be sure to adhere to them. You will be surprised at the satisfaction and productivity boost you will realize.
4. Look at mistakes as opportunities for growth, rather than as signs of failure. We learn from errors, not successes. Each apparent step backward merely brings us closer to our goals.

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# WHY PEOPLE PROCRASTINATE

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Do you tend to procrastinate? Procrastination keeps you from starting, working on, or finishing important tasks. But why do you procrastinate? By looking at the reasons you put things off, you will make valuable discoveries about yourself that can help you put an end to procrastination.

Dr. Burns in *The Feeling Good Handbook* (1989) gives **10 Reasons Why People Procrastinate:**

- 1. Putting the cart before the horse.** Most procrastinators believe that you must feel motivated in order to begin a task. If you wait until you feel motivated or “in the mood” you may never start the task, especially if it is boring or unpleasant. Action comes first before motivation.
- 2. The mastery model.** Do not assume that successful people easily achieve their goals. Most people endure frustration, self-doubt, and overcome obstacles to achieve their personal goals. If you think that it should be easy without setbacks and struggles, you could conclude that something is wrong and give up.
- 3. The fear of failure.** Procrastinators might believe that trying hard and failing is worse than not trying. They can rationalize it by saying “I really did not try, so I truly did not fail”. Or, “I could have done better if I had had more time.” Procrastination is a way to protect them from the possibility of perceived “real failure”. For some people their self-esteem is based on the success of their accomplishments. Or for others, family expectations and standards set by parents may be so high that no one could actually live up to them. Their fear may be so great that they would rather do nothing than risk failure. Consider that the problem is actually the unrealistic standards that have been set, not the failure to meet them.
- 4. Perfectionism.** Trying to do things perfectly can put pressure on people and cause them to feel so stressed that they procrastinate. Instead of doing nothing at all, try to relax and just do your best. If you at least get started on the task, you can always go back later to work on improving the quality.
- 5. Lack of rewards.** Procrastinators tend to put themselves down and not give themselves credit for what they do. Feeling rewarded for your efforts is a great motivator.
- 6. “Should statements.”** Procrastination is often associated with obligation – feeling pulled between what you “should do” and what you want to do. Saying that you should or ought to do something could make the task seem unimportant or not urgent.
- 7. Passive aggressiveness.** Procrastination can be a tool for passive aggressiveness – not expressing negative feelings openly and directly. Your true feelings may come out indirectly through procrastinating on things that others will find frustrating. Example: Chronically showing up late for group projects because you are annoyed with your project leader.
- 8. Unassertiveness.** Be assertive and don’t agree to do things that you don’t really want to do and don’t give in to unreasonable demands from others. Otherwise, you may get overcommitted and procrastinate.

**9. Coercion sensitivity.** Procrastination may be a form of rebelling against people who are making unreasonable demands or coercing you into doing a task. Delaying tactics can be a form of rebellion against imposed schedules, standards, and expectations. This strategy hurts you more than whatever or whomever you are rebelling or resisting (i.e. getting the bad grade, loss of self-respect, etc.).

**10. The lack of desire.** This is probably the most common cause of procrastination. You procrastinate simply because you don't want to do the task. This could be because of a lack of interest. There are times in life when you will have to do things that you don't like or want to do. If your natural interests are not stimulated, one solution to procrastinating might be to "just do it". This will give you more "guilt-free" time to do those things that are more interesting to you.

Understanding the reasons why you procrastinate can help you put the problem into a different perspective. Perhaps your reasons are good ones. Maybe the task is not a high priority. Or, you realize that it is your family and friends who are encouraging you to pursue a goal that you are not committed to or isn't quite right for you. Once you have analyzed the situation you may discover that you never want to do the task you've been putting off. However, if the analysis shows that it is to your benefit to get started on the task then develop a plan.

## **TIPS TO OVERCOMING PROCRASTINATION**

1. Identify the reasons why you are procrastinating on completing a task.
2. Seek help to overcome any self-defeating problems such as fear and anxiety, or perfectionism.
3. Identify your own goals, values and priorities.
4. Ask yourself if your goals realistic? Are your actions consistent with your goals, values, etc.?
5. Develop a plan for completing goals/projects. Outline the smaller steps needed to complete the project or reach your goal.
6. Discipline yourself to use time wisely. Set priorities. Give yourself deadlines for completing tasks.
7. Reward yourself after completing a task. The bigger the accomplishment the bigger the reward should be.

### THE TIC-TOC TECHNIQUE

What are you procrastinating about? Describe it here:

Writing thank-you letters

What negative feelings do you have when you think about doing it? Use words like "anxious," "guilty," "frustrated," or "overwhelmed" and indicate how strong each one is between 0 and 100.

Emotion	Rating	Emotion	Rating
1. <u>Guilty</u>	<u>80</u>	3. <u>Unmotivated</u>	<u>90</u>
2. <u>Bored</u>	<u>90</u>		

<b>TICs</b> (Task-Interfering Cognitions)	<b>Distortions</b> (See list on page 206)	<b>TOCs</b> (Task-Oriented Cognitions)
1. I have all those letters to write.	1. All-or-nothing thinking	1. I don't have to do them all tonight, but I'd probably feel a whole lot better if I did at least one of them.
2. I can put them off until later when I'm more in the mood.	2. Emotional reasoning	2. I don't have to be "in the mood" to get started. Once I get started I'll probably feel more like doing it.
3. I really should write them now, but I don't feel like it.	3. "Should statement"; emotional reasoning	3. It would be to my advantage to start them now.

The thought is an example of "fortune-telling," because you're predicting that this technique won't help you. We don't have any real evidence for that. It's also an example of "emotional reasoning," because you feel that these methods won't help, so you conclude they really won't. Finally, you're "labeling" the technique a "gimmick." This is pejorative. If you think of it as a "method," you will be more open-minded and willing to give it a try.

TICs	Distortions	TOCs
1. I'll never get the garage cleaned. The junk's been piling up for years.	1. Fortune-telling; all-or-nothing thinking	1. I can do a little bit. I don't have to do it all today.
2. I don't want to study for the exam!	2. Emotional reasoning	2. I don't have to <i>want</i> to study, but it would be advisable to do it anyway.
3. I have so much to study. It's overwhelming!	3. All-or-nothing thinking	3. The sooner I get started, the sooner I'll get done. I can think of what I need to do in the next hour instead of worrying about all I have to do.
4. I have no confidence. I don't know how to work some of the problems in the book.	4. Emotional reasoning; "should statement"	4. I'm not supposed to feel confident yet. That's why I need to study.