The 10 Most Common Cognitive Distortions

Below are the 10 most common cognitive distortions, adapted from Chapter 3 of *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* by David Burns. While the examples are directly related to graduate study, you can have such distorted thinking about any area of your life:

1. **All or nothing thinking.** You see things in black or white categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.
    - For example: You're having a difficult time with online learning, and you get a low score on a test. You tell yourself, "I'm a loser—I have no ability to handle stress."
    - Why it's distorted: Everyone experiences both successes and failures. What is a "loser" anyway— someone who fails at absolutely everything? Does anyone like that exist? Most things in life are not simple "black or white" issues. Most things come in "shades of gray."

2. **Overgeneralization.** You see a single negative event as defining your whole "self" or your whole life.
    - For example: You mess up a class presentation. You stumble over words, stutter, and make confusing statements. You tell yourself, "I always do this! I never get anything right."
    - Why it's distorted: One, or even several, bad experiences do not add up to "always." If you flip a coin a thousand times, you might get long stretches of only heads, but eventually you'll get some tails. Overall, the heads and tails will balance, about fifty-fifty. The same goes for good or bad performance, or outcomes, in life.

3. **Mental Filter**. You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes clouded.
    - For example: You realize that, because of the pandemic, you can't easily access a library resource that could help with your research paper. You think: "Everything is ruined and awful now. There's no hope."
    - Why it's distorted: While it's perfectly natural to be frustrated by inconveniences and difficulties, it's not true that "everything" is bad. Even the worst situations are usually a mix of good and bad (or at least neutral and bad). After all, if you're able to feel frustrated, you're fortunate in at least one way: you're still alive!

4. **Discounting (or Disqualifying) the Positive.** You reject positive experiences by insisting that "they don't count" for some reason or other.
    - For example: Your professor says "Great job in class today," and you think: "She's just being nice. She's only saying that because she feels sorry for me."
    - Why it's distorted: You've taken evidence for a positive thing and magically transformed it into evidence for a negative thing—what's more distorted than that?

5. **Jumping to Conclusions.** You make a negative interpretation of events without having any evidence for this interpretation. Two common types of this distortion are "mind reading," in which you assume that you know what someone else is thinking, and "fortune telling," in which you assume that you know what's going to happen in the future.
    - For example: You're meeting with your thesis advisor, and he doesn't seem enthused about some aspects of your project. You start thinking: "He thinks I'm so stupid. He's probably wondering how I got into graduate school" (mind reading). Then you start to tell yourself, "I'm going to fail out of school. I'll never get my degree" (fortune telling).

- o Why it's distorted: No one can read the future or read other people's minds. We've all had times when our casual predictions or expectations were wrong, so we should never jump to firm conclusions without having firm evidence.

6. **Magnification (or Catastrophizing) and Minimization.** You exaggerate the importance of things (e.g. mistakes you've made), or you inappropriately shrink things (e.g. your achievements or someone else's imperfections).
   - o For example: You turn in your paper and, after the fact, realize that you left a typo in the title. You think, "This is a disaster. My professor is going to lose all respect for me. She might even fail me!"
   - o Why it's distorted: By definition, when you minimize or magnify things, you're assigning outsized meaning to them based on emotions, anxieties, or opinions, not on objective facts. Something may feel like a "disaster" in the moment, but it's important to soberly and rationally assess facts to determine whether something really is a big deal (hint: it's usually not).

7. **Emotional reasoning:** You assume that your emotions necessarily reflect the way things are (facts).
   - o For example: You feel intimidated by an upcoming assignment, so you decide that you are unprepared for it or incapable of succeeding at it ("it's a fact").
   - o Why it's distorted: As mentioned earlier, emotions are not always reliable guides to reality. For example, some people are deathly afraid of snakes and others feel similarly about cockroaches. While some snakes are deadly (so perhaps this is a rational fear), cockroaches are, for the most part, harmless. Feeling something doesn't make it true.

8. **Should statements.** You motivate or castigate yourself with "shoulds," "musts," and "oughts."
   - o For example: Your professor expresses dissatisfaction with some of your academic writing skills and suggests that you visit the Graduate Writing Specialist. You think: "What's wrong with me? I've been in school for years—I should be able to write well by now."
   - o Why it's distorted: You're replacing a preference (e.g. "I'd prefer my academic writing skills to be more advanced") with a necessity ("I MUST have acquired these skills by now—therefore, if I haven't, I'm a failure"). People develop at different rates, and life events can unfold in many different ways. There is no law of nature that requires your preferences or expectations to be realized in fact.

9. **Labeling and Mislabeling.** You label people, rather than behavior, as essentially good or bad.
   - o For example: You make a mistake or fail at something, and instead of simply acknowledging the failure, you tell yourself "I'm a loser." Or, someone does something to upset you and you tell yourself, "that person is a total jerk."
   - o Why it's distorted: Bad behavior does not necessarily make a "bad person." As suggested earlier, it's almost impossible to be a "jerk" or "loser" 100% of the time (e.g. by failing at absolutely every undertaking, or being malicious on every possible occasion). So, labeling yourself and others in such absolutist terms is unhelpful and inaccurate.

10. **Personalization.** You blame yourself for external events that you were not primarily responsible for.
    - o For example: You struggle with the shift to online learning as a result of the pandemic, and you end up earning a lower course grade than you expected. You tell yourself, "I screwed up. I should have worked harder."
    - o Why it's distorted: While it's healthy to take responsibility for your actions, it is unhealthy to blame yourself for events outside of your control. You didn't cause the pandemic, so you cannot be 100% responsible for every negative outcome of it, including your own responses to it.