

## Cognitive Errors

People sometimes have thoughts based on faulty assumptions or misconceptions; these are called cognitive (i.e., thinking) errors. Review this list of different kinds of cognitive errors. You will probably come across some errors that sound familiar.

1. All-or-nothing thinking: When you see things in all or nothing categories. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.
2. Overgeneralization: When you see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern. If you do not do well at one thing, you think you are not good at anything.
3. Mental filter: When 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 the entire glass of water.
4. Disqualifying the positive: When you reject positive experiences by insisting they “don’t count” for some reason or another. In this way, you can maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences.
5. Jumping to conclusions: When you make a negative interpretation of an event even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion.
  - a. Mind Reading: When you arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and you do not bother to consider other possible explanations for their behavior (they are tired, they had a rough day, etc.).
  - b. The fortune-teller error: When you anticipate that things will turn out badly, and you feel convinced that your prediction is an already established fact. This prediction may in turn affect your behavior, making it a self-fulfilling prophecy.
6. Binocular vision: When you distort information in such a way that no longer allows you to view the situation realistically.
  - a. Magnification: When you exaggerate the importance of things (such as your goof-up, or someone else’s achievement).
  - b. Minimization: When you inappropriately shrink things until they appear tiny (your own positive qualities or someone else’s imperfections).
7. Catastrophizing: When you predict extreme and horrible consequences to the outcomes of events. A turndown for a date means a life of utter isolation. Or, making a mistake at work means you will be fired for incompetence and never get another job.
8. Emotional reasoning: When you assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are. You might think, “I feel it, therefore it must be true.”
9. “Should” statements: When you try to motivate yourself with “shoulds” and “shouldn’ts,” as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. “Musts” and “oughts” are also offenders. The emotional consequence to this type of statement is guilt. When you direct “should” statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.
10. Labeling and mislabeling: This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: “I’m a failure.” “I’m stupid.” When someone else’s behavior rubs

you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him: “He’s an idiot.” Mislabeled involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.

- 11. Personalization:** When you see negative events as indicative of some negative characteristic of yourself, or you see yourself as the cause of some negative external event for which, in fact, you were not primarily responsible: “I didn’t get that promotion because I’m incompetent.”
- 12. Maladaptive thoughts:** When you focus on something that may in fact be true, but is nonetheless not helpful to focus on excessively: “My knee hasn’t been the same since surgery” “I’m starting to lose my hair.”