

# Cognitive Distortions and Relationships

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Cognitive distortions, or irrational thoughts/problematic ways of thinking, can have a significant impact on us and on our relationships. These thoughts lead to inaccurate perceptions of reality and often reinforce negative thinking (cognitions) and emotions. By pointing out the distortions you are apt to use, not only do you become more mindful of your own thought processes, but you are able to diminish the power the cognitive distortions have over you.

Below are common cognitive distortions with examples to show how they may surface in romantic relationships. It is important to realize that these beliefs can impact any relationship, whether they be those with family, friends, or colleagues. Additionally, by learning how these distortions can impact relationships, you will be able to address them, and in turn strengthen your partnership.

## Should Statements

“Should,” “must,” or “have to” statements are those in which we tell ourselves that things *should* be the way we imagined them. When directed at another person, this can lead to anger.

### Example

Martin had a recent disagreement with his girlfriend Vanessa and thought to himself that relationships *shouldn't* be this hard. In fact, he had seen all the happy photos of his friends and their partners on social media, who appeared to be living wonderful carefree lives. Rather than trying to work things out, he got angry with her because of all the difficulty that they were experiencing.

### Repair

A helpful way to manage this distortion is to step back to examine your relationship-related beliefs, being careful not to make comparisons to others. Remember that each person is an individual who operates on their own timeline and within their own set of unique circumstances. We cannot hold ourselves to the benchmarks of others (such as when to get engaged, married, etc.) or to what we see depicted on social media (think #relationshipgoals).

Martin and Vanessa's relationship is Martin and Vanessa's relationship; what is good for others is not necessarily good for them, and vice versa. It is important to use your own relationship as a marker by which you measure growth, rather than holding yourself to someone else's standard.

After Martin remembered that social media was a carefully curated depiction of the best versions of people and relationships, he let go of the power that these photos had over him. He realized that there is nothing specific that his relationship *should* look like and his relationship with Vanessa was wonderful just as it was. Instead of stewing on the disagreement, he engaged her in a discussion about the issue and they were able to reach a compromise.

## Mitigate Mind Reading

**Jumping to conclusions, or mind reading**, is when a person assumes that they know what others are thinking. This can also surface as **fortune telling** in which a person views the future as pre-determined based on past events.

### Example

Carrie experienced infidelity in her previous relationships. Her last two boyfriends cheated on her, so when her partner Sam started to stay late at work, she immediately jumped to the conclusion that he was cheating. Without even asking, she started to pull back from the relationship, thinking she shouldn't get involved with another person who would break her heart.

### Repair

To break this problematic thinking pattern, focus on exceptions. In reference to the couple, Carrie should focus on the times that Sam demonstrated how trustworthy and caring a partner he

was. Additionally, it is important to be aware of any transference which is when feelings for one person can subconsciously influence feelings about another. Carrie transferred feelings of mistrust because of her relationships with past partners onto her relationship with Sam. Identifying possible triggers and discussing them with Sam would be helpful. For example, after learning about Carrie's previous relationship difficulties, Sam may be more aware of her triggers. When staying late at work, he may choose to send a quick text noting that he can't wait to see her when he gets home. A simple gesture such as a text can have a profound and lasting impact.

## **Catastrophizing**

**Catastrophizing** is when a person focuses on the worst possible scenario and thinks about all the "what ifs," even if there is a low likelihood that they will occur.

### **Example**

Jenna, who tends to catastrophize, was just sent a text by her girlfriend Shana noting that they need to find some time to talk. Shana was eager to plan their next vacation and just wanted to be sure that they had time to catch up before getting involved with other activities once they got home. However, Jenna immediately began to catastrophize, thinking that the text indicated that Shana was going to break up with her. Jenna then started to think about all the other "what ifs," such as what if she would never find another girlfriend she loved as much and what if she was about to spend the rest of her life alone. Jenna began to spiral and got terribly upset.

### **Repair**

To prevent catastrophizing, it is important to realize that you are engaging in this type of thinking. Identifying and labeling this trap can help you to externalize it, which essentially means that you are able to separate yourself from the negative thought spiral. There are two different approaches that may help you to do this.

First, you can devise alternative thoughts. To do this, Jenna can write down the negative and/or anxiety-provoking thought (i.e., "Shana is going to end the relationship."). Below that thought, Jenna can write down all the other alternative possibilities that are more likely to happen in the short-term. For example, she may write, "Shana just needs to share a story about work with me" or "Shana wants to ask me about inviting her parents over for dinner." After listing alternate and more realistic possibilities, which are much less anxiety-inducing, she is likely to feel much better.

The second approach is geared toward someone who is so mired in determining what potential catastrophes may arise that they feel the need to prepare for the worst possible outcome. If using this approach, Jenna may schedule time to allow herself to worry, whether it be 10 or 15 minutes. Once the worst-case scenarios have been explored, it's time for her to put those thoughts away.

## Biased Explanations

**Biased explanations** occur when a person attributes negative motives to others. For example, a person may believe that a friend was nice to them only because this friend felt bad for them. This problematic thinking pattern not only affects how the individual with the biased explanation feels but can also influence their interaction with the other person. Additionally, if a person feels that someone was nice to them out of pity, this can lead to a missed opportunity to form an authentic connection. The person with the distortion may not want to be friends with a person that they perceive pities them.

### Example

Christina is biased in the explanation she gives for her partner's thoughtful action. Her partner, Albert, came home with flowers for her. Christina immediately assumed that the reason he brought flowers was because he had done something wrong and was trying to make up for it. In reality, he just wanted to show her that he cares and thought she would enjoy a beautiful bouquet.

The way we are feeling about our relationship can also influence our likelihood to create biased explanations. For example, if Christina is feeling unsettled in the relationship, she is more likely to suspect that Albert's behaviors are not due to his good nature or desire to do something kind for her.

### Repair

If your biased explanation appears to be related to larger relationship issues and the way you feel about your partner, it's important to address those concerns. If, on the other hand, the biased explanation is due to a cognitive distortion, call it out (to yourself). Simply labeling the distortion will make you more aware of it and assist you in keeping track of your thinking patterns. Then, you will be more likely to take the positive action at face value, rather than dissecting the thoughtful act. Express gratitude and allow yourself to enjoy the unsolicited kind expression.

## Discounting the Positive

**Discounting the positive** is when a person believes that anything positive that is highlighted doesn't really count. This focus on negativity, can eventually lead to feelings of sadness and anxiety. Additionally, if a person continually discounts the positive, it prevents them from owning and enjoying the wonderful and fruitful contributions they make in their interactions with family members, friends, colleagues, and romantic partners.

### Example

Jack and Rosie, a married couple, have two children. Jack told his wife Rosie that he thinks that she is an incredible mother. Rosie, who tends to discount the positive, shared that they just happen to have agreeable and well-behaved kids and that anyone can do what she does. She shared that she doesn't feel that she is special and that she really didn't do anything extraordinary in raising them. Over time, this led to distance between the two, as Rosie became frustrated by

her perception of Jack's unfounded compliments and Jack got upset with Rosie's inability to own her strengths or see things from his perspective.

### **Repair**

To combat this cognitive distortion, a shift in mindset is in order. Focus on the positive, specifically in reference to yourself. Take time to reflect on what you bring to the table in your relationship, as well as your positive attributes. Not only will this make you feel better, but it can also feed back into enhancing your relationship.

To relate this back to the example, Rosie should spend time focusing on all the strengths that she possesses and on what she contributed to their partnership. She may choose to do this by writing in a daily journal or jotting down specific achievements, no matter how big or how small. Over time, she will create a habit in which she focuses on the positive and on her role in the relationship/family.

## **Emotional Reasoning**

**Emotional reasoning** is when you assume that your emotions explain things as they exist. Essentially a person thinks that whatever they feel is to be taken as objective truth. This can be problematic because our emotions don't always align with the reality of a situation.

### **Example**

Jason woke up feeling sad and then started to believe that he was a sad person. As such, he felt that he wasn't a good partner for his upbeat and wonderful fiancé Dawn. Over time, Jason started to distance himself from Dawn wanting her to be with someone with a more positive outlook. This distance due to Jason's emotional reasoning, eventually lead to the breakdown in the relationship.

### **Repair**

The best way to manage this cognitive distortion is to externalize or distance our thoughts from ourselves. This means that the thought is just a separate thought, not part of who we are. By doing this, we are better able to objectively deal with the thoughts and infuse logic rather than pure emotion.

If Jason externalizes his sadness, he is more likely to view it as something separate from him and as something that does not define him. Therefore, he would be better able to identify self-care activities that would serve to mitigate this emotion and help him avoid viewing it in such a global manner.

Having a conversation with your partner in which you share your emotions, and any related thoughts would be beneficial. If Jason shared his experience of sadness with his partner, she may have been able to collaborate with him on identifying the root cause or assisting him in employing coping techniques.

## **Labeling**

**Labeling** is when a person identifies with their shortcomings. In this case a person can reduce themselves, or someone else (such as their partner) to a label. For example, a person may label themselves as “lazy” or “stupid,” which in turn affects how they view themselves (or their partners) and how they interact with others.

### **Example**

Take for example Erika, who forgot that her boyfriend was getting his annual review at work. Over dinner, she started sharing the events of her day when her boyfriend Sean reminded her about his review. Erika labeled herself as selfish for not remembering and not asking Sean about it. Sean, however, didn't even think anything of it and just chalked it up to Erika having a lot on her mind. Erika, viewing herself as selfish, began to feel bad about herself and didn't view herself as a good partner for Sean. This, in turn, caused her to pull back from the relationship.

### **Repair**

The best way to handle the tendency to label is to think about the entire situation and what led to the troublesome interaction, rather than attributing the issue to a character flaw. Referring to the couple, Erika should focus on why she forgot to ask Sean about his review, which was because she was so excited to share her day with him. She simply forgot to ask and wasn't intentionally being selfish. Reflecting on this will help her avoid characterizing herself as selfish, and instead allow her to have an engaged conversation with Shawn about his review.

## **Filtering**

**Filtering** is when a person focuses on the bad and filters, or potentially blocks out the positive aspects of a situation. This focus on the negative can cause a person to fixate and may alter their view of whatever they are thinking about.

### **Example**

Terry, who was already angry at his partner John, overheard John's brother call him selfish. As a result of Terry's anger, frustration, and the label he overheard, he filtered all his beliefs about his partner through the belief “John is a selfish person.” Therefore, when John picked out a movie for date night and started to prepare dinner that evening, Terry immediately focused on the fact that the cuisine and movie were John's favorites and viewed these decisions as selfish and uncaring. In reality, Terry also liked the movie and choice of cuisine. However, when using the selfish filter and focusing on the negative, Terry completely glossed over the idea that John was trying to do something nice for him.

### **Repair**

To counteract filtering, focus on the positive behaviors that your partner is displaying. Not only will this help to change your mindset, but it may also serve as a positive reinforcer for your partner's behavior.

One way to focus on positivity in a concrete way would be to maintain a gratitude journal, specifically centered on your relationship. Typically, with gratitude journals a person will create one entry per day listing three things for which they are thankful. What you include can be as simple as wanting to express gratitude for a wonderful cup of coffee. To create a journal specific to your relationship, shift the focus to your daily couple interactions and experiences. For example, listing your gratitude for the cheery morning greeting your partner met you with as you got out of bed will help you focus on the wonderful aspects of your relationship.

## **Overgeneralization**

**Overgeneralization** is when a person automatically assumes that if something happens one time it is bound to happen over and over again, or that a behavior displayed in one situation is indicative of that person's general behavior in all situations.

An example of the former would be if a person was rejected by a potential partner, they overgeneralize and assume that they are bound to be rejected by every subsequent person they ask out. An example of the latter would be if a person assumed that if they got into a fight with their partner at their company holiday party, they would also get into a fight with their partner at their family holiday party.

### **Example**

Paul recently got into a heated discussion with his fiancée Sara about the involvement of her parents in planning their wedding. He exhibited the tendency to overgeneralize by assuming that all their decisions would be unfairly influenced by his in-laws. Not only was he angry with his fiancée and her parents, but he started to pull back from making plans with them. Out of concern that they would try to interfere, he also avoided discussing his personal life with them.

### **Repair**

To combat overgeneralization, it is helpful to identify the exceptions to the rule, or in this case, your belief. In reference to this couple, Paul may want to spend time thinking about all the decisions that he made with Sara that didn't involve interference from his in-laws, such as purchasing a house and planning their honeymoon. By doing this, he moves away from a focus on the problem (the overgeneralized belief), which enables him to open up and examine potential solutions. At the very least, it enables him to have a conversation with Sara in which they avoid making assumptions.

It is also important to alter your mindset so that you can focus on the positive. Without even identifying the exceptions, Paul, in re-examining the situation, may conclude that Sara's parents want to get involved to assist with the lengthy list of tasks that they must complete before the upcoming nuptials and be a source of support.