

# Self-Limiting Beliefs (Cognitive Distortions), How to Confront

What's a *cognitive distortion* and why do so many people have them? Cognitive distortions are simply ways that our mind convinces us of something that isn't really true. These inaccurate thoughts are usually used to reinforce negative thinking or emotions — telling ourselves things that sound rational and accurate, but really only serve to keep us feeling bad about ourselves. Psychologist, Aaron Beck first proposed the theory behind cognitive distortions, which later became known as self-limiting beliefs by David Burns, MD who offered common names and examples.

Self-limiting beliefs are at the core of many coaches' thinking and part of what the coach can do to help them learn to change. Coaches who correctly identify these beliefs, can guide coaches to recognize their negative thinking patterns and rationalizations. By continually to refute the negative thinking over and over again, the coachee will slowly diminish it over time and automatically replace it with more rational, balanced thinking.

## 1. Filtering

We take the negative details and magnify them while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation. For instance, a person may pick out a single, unpleasant detail and dwell on it exclusively so that their vision of reality becomes darkened or distorted.

## 2. Polarized Thinking (or "Black and White" Thinking)

In polarized thinking, things are either "black-or-white." We have to be perfect or we're a failure, there is no middle ground. This thinking places people or situations in "either/or" categories, with no shades of gray or allowing for the complexity of most people and situations. If a person's performance falls short of perfect, they see themselves as a total failure.

## 3. Overgeneralization

We come to a general conclusion based on a single incident or a single piece of evidence. If something bad happens only once, we expect it to happen over and over again. A person may see a single, unpleasant event as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat.

## 4. Jumping to Conclusions

Without others saying so, we know what they are feeling and why they act the way they do. We are able to determine how people are feeling toward us. For example, a person may conclude that someone is reacting negatively toward them but doesn't bother to find out if they are correct. Alternatively a person may anticipate that things will turn out badly, and will feel convinced that their prediction is already an established fact.

## 5. Catastrophizing

We expect disaster to strike, no matter what. This is also referred to as "magnifying or minimizing." We hear about a problem and use *what if* questions (e.g., "What if tragedy strikes?" "What if it happens to me?") For example, a person might exaggerate the importance of insignificant events (such as their mistake, or someone else's achievement). Or they may inappropriately shrink the magnitude of significant events until they appear tiny (for example, a person's own desirable qualities or someone else's imperfections).

## 6. Personalization

Personalization is happening when we believe that everything others do or say is some kind of direct, personal reaction to them. We also compare ourselves to others trying to determine who is smarter, a better leader, etc.

## 7. Control Fallacies

If we feel *externally controlled*, we see ourselves as helpless a victim of fate. For example, "I can't help it if the quality of the work is poor, my boss demanded I work overtime to get it done."

The fallacy of *internal control* has us assuming responsibility for the pain and happiness of everyone around us. For example, "Why aren't you happy? Is it because of something I did?"

## 8. Fallacy of Fairness

We feel resentful because we think we know what is fair, but other people won't agree with us. As our parents tell us when we're growing up and something doesn't go our way, "Life isn't always fair." People who go through life applying a measuring ruler against every situation judging its "fairness" will often feel badly and negative because of it.

## 9. Blaming

We hold other people responsible for our pain, or take the other track and blame ourselves for every problem. For example, "Stop making me feel bad about myself!" Nobody can "make" us feel any particular way — only we have control over our own emotions and emotional reactions.

## 10. Should Thinking

We have a list of ironclad rules about how others and we should behave. People who break the rules make us angry, and we feel guilty when we violate these rules. A person may often believe they are trying to motivate themselves with shoulds and shouldn'ts, as if they have to be punished before they do anything. For example, "I really should exercise. I shouldn't be so lazy." *Musts* and *oughts* are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When a person directs *should statements* toward others, they often feel anger, frustration and resentment.

## 11. Emotional Reasoning

We believe that what we feel must be true automatically. If we feel stupid and boring, then we must be stupid and boring. We assume that our unhealthy emotions reflect the way things really are — "I feel it, therefore it must be true."

## 12. Fallacy of Change

We expect that other people will change to suit us if we just pressure or cajole them enough. We need to change people because our hopes for happiness seem to depend entirely on them.

## 13. Global Labeling

We generalize one or two qualities into a negative global judgment. These are extreme forms of generalizing, and referred to as "labeling" and "mislabeling." Instead of describing an error in context of a specific situation, we will attach an unhealthy label to themselves. For example, they may say, "I'm a loser" in a situation where they failed at a specific task. When someone else's behavior rubs us the wrong way, we may attach an unhealthy label, such as "He's a real jerk." Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded. For example, instead of saying someone drops her children off at daycare every day, a person who is mislabeling might say that "she abandons her children to strangers."

## 14. Always Being Right

We are continually on trial to prove that our opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and we will go to any length to demonstrate our rightness. For example, "I don't care how badly arguing with me makes you feel, I'm going to win this argument no matter what because I'm right." Being right often is more important than the feelings of others around a person who engages in this cognitive distortion, even loved ones.

## 15. Heaven's Reward Fallacy

We expect our sacrifice and self-denial to pay off, as if someone is keeping score. We feel bitter when the reward doesn't come.