

## Thinking Errors and Self-Defeating Beliefs

These are common exaggerations or distortions in our thinking that often lead to increased stress, anxiety, or other forms of distress. Some of the most common ones are listed below.

1. **All-Or-Nothing Thinking:** Also called “black-and-white” thinking. You see things in black-and-white, either/or categories, instead of on a continuum. Things are either good or bad. Usually, the good category is small and hard to get into, while the bad category is larger and easy to fall into. There is no such thing as doing OK, or being *partly* successful. For example, if your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure. This distortion causes you to fear any mistake or imperfection, because you will then see yourself as a complete loser, and you will feel inadequate and worthless. When you hear yourself using words like “always,” “never,” “completely,” “totally,” and “perfectly,” begin to suspect this type of thinking error.
2. **Personalization and blame:** You blame yourself for something you weren’t entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and deny your role in the problem. You may also see yourself as the cause of some negative or even neutral interpersonal interaction, while overlooking situational factors or the role of the other person. Even if you “know” you are not the cause of the event, you blame yourself anyway.
3. **Catastrophizing:** *In the anxious moment*, you think about the scariest possible thing that could possibly be happening and exclusively focus on it while imagining it will likely happen. You do not consider other possibilities and stay glued onto your greatest fear. You may also catastrophize about some *future event* or situation by focusing on the worst possible outcome, thereby making a dire prediction about the future that you keep playing and replaying in your head.
4. **Overestimation of risk:** You overestimate the probability that something really catastrophic could happen and resist more benign possibilities. Your estimates of danger are grossly overstated and conversely your estimates of being safe are not even considered. You thereby in your mind make the anxious conclusion more probable or likely.
5. **Mind Reading:** You act as if you absolutely know what others are thinking. You arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you, and unfortunately, you rarely check out your assumption.
6. **Emotional Reasoning:** You think something must be true because you “feel” that way, ignoring evidence to the contrary. You act as if your emotions reflect reality. “*I feel* worthless, therefore *I am* worthless.” “*I feel* foolish, therefore *I am* an idiot.”
7. **Overgeneralization:** You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. Arbitrarily, you conclude that things that happened to you before will occur over and over again, without any hope for change. This is frequently a sweeping negative conclusion that goes far beyond the current situation that triggered the automatic thought.
8. **Labeling:** This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a global negative label to yourself: “I’m a loser.” From a single, point-in-time behavior, your global label applies for all time: past, present and future.

9. **Mental Filter:** Also called “selective abstraction.” You pick out a single, negative detail in a situation and dwell on it exclusively, thus perceiving the whole situation as negative. You may tend to view negative events as internal (from within you), global (generalizes to other areas of your life), and stable (not likely to change). Because you are not aware of this filtering process, you conclude that everything is negative, instead of seeing the whole picture.
10. **Disqualifying the Positive:** This goes along with Mental Filter. You routinely reject positive experiences by insisting that they “don’t count” for one reason or another. You may view positive events as external (due to luck, chance, some external factor), specific (just this one time, doesn’t generalize to other areas of your life), and unstable (not likely to stay). In this way, you maintain a negative belief regardless of evidence to the contrary. You resist giving yourself credit. Disqualifying the positive is one of the most destructive forms of cognitive distortion, because it blocks you from any positive change.
11. **Magnification or minimization:** You blow things way out of proportion or you shrink their importance. You may magnify one aspect of a situation or interaction that did not go perfectly while minimizing other aspects. You may react to situations with more intensity or anxiety than you “know” is necessary.
12. **‘Should’ and ‘Must’ Statements:** You set up arbitrary and frequently unrealistic rules or expectations for behavior. You overestimate the importance when your expectation is not met. The rules often reflect an unattainable or perfectionistic standard. “I should never look anxious.” Sometimes the rules are vague and undefined. “I should have done better.” The expectations often reflect a refusal to accept the reality of a situation over which you may have little or no control.
13. **Maladaptive Thoughts:** This final category is a little different from the rest. These are thoughts that don’t *necessarily* contain obvious thinking errors. But they are pointless, because they cause anxiety and distress, negatively affect performance, and contribute nothing helpful whatsoever. Here’s an example: “I’ve never done this before!” Although this statement may be perfectly true, if repeated excessively, it is unhelpful. Further, it may trigger real thinking errors, such as “I’ll fail at this task!” Now we have a perfect example of “fortune telling.”

### Other Self-Defeating Beliefs

As you begin to uncover thinking errors, you may notice a more general pattern of negative or self-defeating beliefs. Such beliefs undermine your potential for happiness. They leave you stuck in an unworkable assumption. Are any of the following beliefs getting in the way for you?

1. **Emotional Perfectionism:** “I should always feel happy, confident, and in control of my emotions.”
2. **Emotophobia (fear of emotions):** “I should never feel angry, anxious, inadequate, jealous, or vulnerable.”
3. **Conflict Phobia:** “People who love each other shouldn’t fight.” “I can’t express my feelings because I might hurt another person.”
4. **Entitlement:** “People should be the way that I expect them to be.”
5. **Low Frustration Tolerance:** “I should never be frustrated. Life should be easy.”
6. **Performance Perfectionism:** “I must never fail or make a mistake.”
7. **Perceived Perfectionism:** “People will not love and accept me as a flawed and vulnerable human being.”
8. **Fear of Failure:** “My worthwhileness depends on my achievements (or my intelligence, or status, or attractiveness)”.
9. **Fear of Disapproval or Criticism:** “I need everybody’s approval to be worthwhile.”
10. **Fear of Rejection or Being Alone:** “If I’m alone, then I’m bound to feel miserable and unfulfilled. If I’m not loved, then life is not worth living.”