15 Common Thinking Traps

In 1976, psychologist Aaron Beck proposed the theory behind cognitive distortions, and in the 1980s, David Burns popularized it with common names and examples.

Filtering. Filtering is taking out all positives in a situation and, instead, dwelling on its negatives. Example: In your performance review, your manager mentioned that you've done well in ABC, and provided suggestion of area of improvement on D. You feel really bad for messing up D, and you leave the meeting feeling miserable and dwell on how much a failure you are for messing up D.

Polarization. Polarized thinking is thinking about yourself and the world in an "all-or-nothing" way. Example: You felt so competent in your work until you got a suggestion of area of improvement from your manager, now you feel useless and incompetent ("I'm either competent or I'm a failure".)

Overgeneralization. When you overgeneralize something, you take an isolated negative event and turn it into a never-ending pattern of loss and defeat. With overgeneralization, words like "always," "never," "everything," and "nothing" are frequent in your train of thought. Example: Your friend is not able to hangout with you this weekend, you start feeling sad worrying that you're not important to your friend.

Discounting the positive. Discounting positives is similar to filtering. The main difference is that you dismiss it as something of no value when you do think of positive aspects. Example: if your manager told you that you've done a great job, you think they're just being nice.

Jumping to conclusions. When you jump to conclusions, you interpret an event or situation negatively without evidence supporting such a conclusion. Then, you react to your assumption. Example: Your partner didn't want to talk after he came home from work. Instead of asking how they're doing, you immediately assume they're probably mad at you. Consequently, you keep your distance. In reality, your partner had a bad day at work.

Catastrophizing. Catastrophizing is related to jumping to conclusions. In this case, you jump to the worst possible conclusion in every scenario, no matter how improbable it is. Example: what

if I can't speak clearly in the meeting? What if my boss thinks I'm incompetent? What if I get fired after working so hard for this job?

Personalization. Personalization leads you to believe that you're responsible for events that, in reality, are completely or partially out of your control. With personalizing, you take things personally. This cognitive distortion often results in you feeling guilty or assigning blame without considering all factors involved. Example, you feel responsible for keeping everyone around you happy, and if they're not, it must be you are not being a good partner/son/daughter/coworker/friend. In reality, how can you be responsible for someone else's happiness?

Control fallacies. You either feel responsible or in control of everything in your and other people's lives, or you feel you have no control at all over anything in your life. Example: you think you make someone else happy or unhappy. You think all of their emotions are controlled directly or indirectly by your behaviors. In reality, how can you be responsible for someone else's happiness?

Fallacy of fairness. This cognitive distortion refers to measuring every behavior and situation on a scale of fairness. In other words, you believe you know what's fair and what isn't, and it upsets you when other people disagree with you. Example: you expect your partner to clean the house without telling them to do so. It's only "fair" since you spent all afternoon making them dinner. In reality, they cannot read your mind that you have this expectation unless you both agreed on this arrangement.

Blaming. Blaming refers to making others responsible for how you feel or act. Example: "I'm hitting you because you made me mad". In reality, people are responsible for their own behaviors and emotions.

Shoulds. "should" statements are subjective ironclad rules you set for yourself and others without considering the specifics of a circumstance. You tell yourself that things *should* be a certain way with no exceptions. Example: I should be available to my friends whenever they need me (even at the cost of my sleep and mental wellness.)

Emotional reasoning. Emotional reasoning leads you to believe that the way you feel is a reflection of reality. For example, I feel incompetent therefore I must have done a bad job at work.

Fallacy of change. You expecting other people will change their ways to suit your expectations or needs, particularly when you pressure them enough. For example, if I just try hard enough, they'll fall in love with me. Reality is, something in our lives is just outside of our control.

Global labeling. Labeling or mislabeling refers to taking a single attribute and turning it into an absolute. For example, you call yourself "lazy" when you're not motivated to play the piano after a whole day of work.

Always being right. You believe that your opinion is fact without examining your own biases. For example, you try to convince your cousin not to waste time in art school since other professions can lead to more stable income. Reality is, stable income might be important to you but not your cousin, and, maybe there are professions that could lead to more stable income after someone graduates from art school, and, maybe your cousin wants to live their lives they way they have not communicated to you, and, many many other reasons. Not that you are necessarily wrong, just different.