



FREE DOWNLOAD

Cognitive Distortions *Quick Guide*

12 patterns. A calmer reframe for each.
Print and keep on your desk.

 mindlinen

Therapy-aligned worksheets · Hamburg, Germany

First the awareness, then the reframe.

Cognitive distortions are mental shortcuts that bend reality in painful ways. Everyone has them. They're not signs of something broken — just the brain trying to predict, protect, simplify. The trouble starts when they run unchecked. This guide names the 12 most common patterns, gives you a typical example, and offers a calmer way to look at the same thought. Read it through once. Then keep it visible — on your desk, in your notebook, in your phone.

FOUR-STEP RHYTHM

1. **Notice** Catch a thought that feels heavier than the situation deserves.
2. **Name** Find the matching pattern below — even a partial fit counts.
3. **Reframe** Rewrite the thought using the suggested template.
4. **Repeat** It gets faster with practice. Five seconds is the goal.

EDUCATIONAL — NOT MEDICAL ADVICE

This guide is for self-reflection, not a substitute for therapy. If a thought is overwhelming, please talk to a licensed therapist.

The 12 patterns

#01

All-or-Nothing Thinking

black-and-white thinking, polarized thinking, dichotomous thinking

You see things in absolute, black-or-white categories. There's no middle ground — something is either perfect or a total failure, you're either successful or worthless.

"If I don't get this promotion, my career is over."

REFRAME

Look for the middle ground. What does "good enough" look like here? Most outcomes live on a spectrum, not at the extremes.

#02

Catastrophizing

magnifying, awfulizing, worst-case thinking

You expect the worst possible outcome and assume you couldn't cope with it. A small problem balloons into an imagined disaster.

"My boss didn't reply to my email — I'm going to be fired."

REFRAME

Ask: what's the most likely outcome, not the worst? And: even if the bad thing happened — could I get through it?

#03

Mind-Reading

assuming, projecting

You assume you know what other people are thinking — usually something negative about you — without any actual evidence.

"She didn't smile back. She must think I'm annoying."

REFRAME

What evidence do I actually have? What are 3 other reasons their behaviour could be explained — none of which involve me at all?

#04

Fortune-Telling

predicting the future, anticipating disaster

You predict the future negatively, treating an imagined outcome as if it's already a fact. Different from catastrophizing — here you don't necessarily go worst-case, you just feel certain you know what will happen.

"There's no point applying — I won't get the job anyway."

REFRAME

Notice the certainty. You don't actually know. What if you replaced "I will" with "I might" — does the thought still feel as heavy?

The 12 patterns

#05

Should Statements

musts, oughts, have-tos

You criticize yourself or others with rigid "shoulds", "musts", and "have-tos". The result is guilt when applied to yourself, anger when applied to others.

"I should have known better. I shouldn't be this upset over nothing."

REFRAME

Try replacing "should" with "would prefer" or "could". "I would prefer to have handled that better." Same intent, no shame layer.

#06

Labeling

global labeling, name-calling

Instead of describing a behaviour, you assign a global, identity-defining label — to yourself or someone else. "I made a mistake" becomes "I'm a failure."

"I forgot to reply to her message. I'm such an awful friend."

REFRAME

Switch from identity to behaviour: "I did X" instead of "I am X". One action does not equal a whole identity.

#07

Personalization

self-blame, taking it personally

You blame yourself for events that aren't fully (or at all) your responsibility. You take personal hits for outcomes shaped by many people, contexts, and accidents.

"My friend was quiet at dinner. It must be because of something I said."

REFRAME

Draw a responsibility pie chart. How much is genuinely yours? What % belongs to context, other people, biology, randomness?

#08

Emotional Reasoning

feelings as facts

You take an emotion as proof of a fact. "I feel like a failure" becomes evidence that you are one. "I feel anxious" becomes evidence something bad will happen.

"I feel guilty, so I must have done something wrong."

REFRAME

Feelings are signals, not verdicts. Try: "I feel X — and that's just a feeling. The feeling doesn't prove anything about reality."

The 12 patterns

#09

Mental Filter

negative filtering, tunnel vision

You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively, while filtering out everything that went well. Your brain treats the one criticism as the headline.

"My presentation got 9 great responses and 1 critical one. I can't stop thinking about the critical one."

REFRAME

Force the full picture. Write down 3 things that went well alongside the one negative thing. Look at the ratio.

#10

Disqualifying the Positive

doesn't count, just lucky

Positive things happen but you find a reason they don't count. "They were just being polite." "That was luck." "It doesn't really mean anything."

"They said the project was great, but they probably just say that to everyone."

REFRAME

Try the test: would you discount this if a colleague told you the same story? If no, you're applying a special rule only to yourself.

#11

Overgeneralization

always-and-never thinking, broad-brushing

You take a single negative event and conclude it will happen forever, in every situation. One rejection becomes "I'll always be alone."

"I bombed that interview. I'll never get hired anywhere."

REFRAME

Catch the "always" / "never". Replace with "this time" or "in this situation". One data point isn't a trend.

#12

Fairness Fallacy

it's not fair, comparing fairness

You measure life by your own definition of fairness — and feel resentful or miserable when reality doesn't comply. Life rarely operates by anyone's personal fairness rule.

"It's not fair. I worked harder than her and she got the promotion."

REFRAME

Trade "fair" for "useful". What does this situation actually require of me right now, regardless of fairness?

IF A THOUGHT FEELS OVERWHELMING

This guide is for the everyday weight.

Some thoughts are heavier than a reframe can hold. If you're in serious distress, experiencing persistent low mood, or having thoughts of self-harm, please reach out for human help. Free and confidential support is available right now:

GERMANY

Telefonseelsorge

0800 111 0 111
Free, 24/7

EU

Emergency

112
All EU countries

US

988 Lifeline

988
Free, 24/7

UK

Samaritans

116 123
Free, 24/7



For the work between sessions.

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