



# About Cognitive Distortions

## **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for People Managers**

Identifying common cognitive distortions is an important first step in training managers and employees about how to navigate these behaviors with others. Here is a list of the ten most common cognitive distortions (in descending order) that people have in the workplace. These cognitive distortions can lead to negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—such as anxiety, depression, and procrastination.



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- **All-or-nothing thinking:** Seeing things in black and white, with no shades of gray. For example, thinking “I’m a failure if I don’t get a promotion.”
- **Overgeneralization:** Drawing broad conclusions based on a single event or piece of evidence. For example, thinking “I made a mistake on my presentation, so I’m a terrible employee.”
- **Mental filtering:** Focusing on the negative aspects of a situation and ignoring the positive. For example, thinking “My boss didn’t say anything good about my presentation, so they must have thought it was awful.”
- **Discounting the positive:** Minimizing or dismissing positive experiences or accomplishments. For example, thinking “I got a good performance review only because my boss was in a good mood.”
- **Jumping to conclusions:** Making assumptions about a situation without all the facts. For example, thinking “My boss didn’t call me back, so they must be mad at me.”
- **Magnifying or minimizing:** Exaggerating the negative aspects of a situation or minimizing the positive. For example, thinking “If I make a mistake, I’m going to get fired” or “My presentation wasn’t that bad.”
- **Should statements:** Having unrealistic expectations of yourself and others. For example, thinking “I should be able to do this perfectly” or “My boss should be more understanding.”
- **Emotional reasoning:** Believing that your emotions are always accurate reflections of reality. For example, thinking “I feel anxious, so I must be in danger.”
- **Personalization:** Taking things personally when they’re not. For example, thinking “My boss criticized me because they don’t like me.”
- **Blame:** Blaming yourself or others for problems, even when it’s not your fault. For example, thinking “I’m a failure because my team didn’t meet its goals.”



## Exercise for Part 1:

In your small group, read this list of distortions and see if you have any personal examples of using one or more of them yourself and what impact they had on your levels of stress or anxiety.

Next, scan the list to share any recent examples of distortion by a direct report or peer. The intent of this discussion is to become conscious of how our thoughts can get distorted and to look for language or evidence of it in the workplace or in your life. In part two, we'll work as coaches on the distortions.

- What recent examples of each cognitive distortion can you think of in yourself or in a direct report or peer?
- How can cognitive distortions lead to anxiety? What do you notice about the impact of the thought or distortion on the state of being or behavior of the individual or yourself?

## Part 2: Coaching a Peer or Direct Report with a Distortion

It's helpful to first learn how to coach yourself and then apply the same methods when talking to someone else.

### Using the Five Steps with Yourself:

- 1. Identify the distortion:** The first step is to identify the cognitive distortion in your thinking. Once you're aware of the distortion, you can start to challenge it.
- 2. Gather evidence:** Ask yourself if there is any evidence to support your negative thought. Is there another way to look at the situation?
- 3. Consider alternative explanations:** Are there other possible explanations for what happened?
- 4. Test your negative thought:** Is there a way to test your negative thought? For example, if you're thinking "My boss is angry with me," you could ask them directly how they're feeling.
- 5. Replace your negative thought with a more realistic one:** Once you've challenged your negative thought, replace it with a more realistic one. For example, instead of thinking "I'm going to fail this presentation," you could think "I'm prepared and I'm going to do my best."



## Exercise for Part 2:

- Take five minutes quietly in your groups to find a recent distortion you experienced and walk yourself through the five steps above.
- Next, take ten minutes to share reflections of the actual five steps with your group. Notice how you feel after you “self-coach.” Does it change your mental state or physical state in any way? What do you notice?
- If you have extra time, imagine yourself applying the five steps in a coaching scenario with a direct report (see below). Can you visualize the conversation? What do you notice? Talk with your group.

## Using the Five Steps with a Direct Report:

- 1. Identify the distortion:** The first step is to identify the cognitive distortion in the direct report's thinking. Once you are aware of the distortion, you can start to challenge it.
- 2. Gather evidence:** Ask the direct report if there is any evidence to support their negative thought. Is there another way to look at the situation?
- 3. Consider alternative explanations:** Are there other possible explanations for what happened? For example, if the direct report is thinking “I made a mistake, so I'm a terrible employee,” you could help them identify other possible explanations, such as “I was tired and rushed” or “I'm still new to this job.”
- 4. Test the negative thought:** Is there a way to test the direct report's negative thought? For example, if the direct report is thinking “My boss is angry with me,” the manager could suggest that the direct report ask their boss directly how they're feeling.
- 5. Replace the negative thought with a more realistic one:** Once the manager has helped the direct report challenge their negative thought, they can help them develop a more realistic one to replace it. For example, instead of thinking “I'm going to fail this presentation,” the direct report could think “I'm prepared and I'm going to do my best.”



## Here's a Mock Conversation to Illustrate How the Discovery Process Works:

In this conversation, the manager used the five steps above to challenge the direct report's cognitive distortions.

**Manager:** Hi Jane, I noticed that you've been looking a little down lately. Is everything okay?

**Jane:** I'm just a little nervous about my presentation next week. I'm afraid I'm going to mess up and everyone will think I'm incompetent.

**Manager:** That's understandable. Presentations can be nerve-racking. But I know you're well prepared, and I'm confident that you'll do great.

**Jane:** Thanks, but I'm still worried. What if I forget something important? What if I make a mistake and everyone laughs at me?

**Manager:** Let's try to challenge those negative thoughts. First, what evidence do you have to support the thought that you're going to forget something important?

**Jane:** Well, I've been really busy lately and haven't had as much time to practice as I would like.

**Manager:** Okay, but that doesn't mean you're going to forget something important. You're a smart and capable person, and you've put a lot of work into this presentation.

**Jane:** Yeah, I guess you're right.

**Manager:** Now let's consider some alternative explanations for why you might make a mistake. Is it possible that you'll make a mistake because you're nervous?

**Jane:** Yeah, that's possible.

**Manager:** So instead of thinking "I'm going to mess up and everyone will think I'm incompetent," what if you told yourself "It's normal to feel nervous, and I'm prepared to handle any mistakes that I make"?

**Jane:** That's a good idea.

**Manager:** Great! Now, let's replace your negative thought with a more realistic one. What would be a more realistic thought to have about your presentation?

**Jane:** I guess I could think "I'm prepared and I'm going to do my best."

**Manager:** That's perfect! That's a much more realistic and empowering thought to have.

**Jane:** Thanks for your help. I feel a lot better now.

**Manager:** You're welcome. I'm always here to support you.



## Helpful Resources for Additional Learning:

Here are five helpful links to websites and articles on the topic of cognitive distortions and coaching:

- **Cognitive Distortions: Unhelpful Thinking Habits from Psychology Tools:** This article provides a comprehensive overview of cognitive distortions, including what they are, how they form, and how they can lead to negative emotions and behaviors. It also includes strategies for challenging and changing cognitive distortions.
- **Using Coaching to Help Clients Identify and Challenge Cognitive Distortions from the International Coaching Federation:** This article provides coaches with information on how to help their clients identify and challenge cognitive distortions. It includes specific strategies and exercises that coaches can use.
- **Cognitive Distortions: What They Are and How to Overcome Them** from the Mayo Clinic: This article provides a clear and concise overview of cognitive distortions. It also includes tips for overcoming them.
- **Coaching for Cognitive Distortions from the Association for Coaching:** This article provides coaches with information on the different types of cognitive distortions and how to help their clients identify and challenge them.
- **How to Identify and Challenge Cognitive Distortions from Verywell Mind:** This article provides a step-by-step guide for identifying and challenging cognitive distortions. It also includes a list of common cognitive distortions and examples of how to challenge them.



## Here Are Five Books to Learn More About Cognitive Distortions and How to Coach Your Direct Reports::

1. ***Coaching for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*** by Josie Beilin and Sarah Cowley: This book provides a comprehensive overview of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and how it can be used in a coaching context. It includes specific strategies for helping clients identify and challenge cognitive distortions.
2. ***Mind Over Mood*** by Aaron T. Beck: This book is a classic self-help book on CBT. It provides readers with an understanding of cognitive distortions and how to challenge them. It also includes specific strategies for dealing with common mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression.
3. ***The CBT Coach's Toolkit*** by Russ Harris: This book provides coaches with a variety of tools and resources for helping their clients with CBT. It includes specific strategies for helping clients identify and challenge cognitive distortions.
4. ***The Mindful Coach*** by James Manning: This book teaches coaches how to use mindfulness to help their clients make positive changes. It includes specific strategies for helping clients identify and challenge cognitive distortions.
5. ***The CBT Workbook for Anxiety*** by Edmund J. Bourne: This workbook provides readers with a variety of exercises and worksheets for helping them challenge cognitive distortions and manage anxiety.

