
S2C6. Cognitive distortions

As discussed in the previous chapter, cognitive distortions are thought patterns that may convince us of things that are not necessarily true or correct. Since our mental wellbeing depends upon the thoughts that cross our minds, these distortions can cause severe damage in case of negative thought patterns. We may keep feeling that we are right in our assessment of the situation, may make incorrect decisions, may take incorrect actions, and may end up making either ourselves, or others, or both, miserable.

Some cognitive distortions may impact us more than others and sometimes more than one distortion may be present at the same time. Recognizing that you are a victim to these cognitive distortions may enable you to deal with the situation in a more rational way. It may sometimes be instrumental in helping you salvage your breaking or broken relationships, as well as lifting your own sense of self-esteem.

Cognitive distortions are also very sneaky. They make their way into our lives and take over our thinking so sneakily that sometimes we do not even realize when we become the victims to these distortions until they are pointed out to us. More awareness and internalization of these distortions and modifying behavior through cognitive restructuring will make our thinking more adaptive and speed up the recovery process. We shall touch upon twelve cognitive distortions, recognizing them and learning how to counter them.

1. Filtering: As the name suggests, filtering refers to leaving out something – in this case, the positives. Like using a camera filter that allows light of a specific kind and filters out what is unneeded. Filtering, as a cognitive distortion, refers to developing a blinkered view of what one sees and leaving out what goes against the view that one has formed. For example, whenever your partner does not text on time, you may notice it, but when she does, you may not. This means you may be filtering out all the times she does text you on time and may believe that she never texts back on time, which causes you to become anxious.

For cognitive restructuring in this distortion, you need to closely look at all these situations and objectively see both sides of the coin. You can ask yourself if what you are feeling is really absolutely true or there are points that you have been ignoring. What is the evidence in favor of your thinking and what is the evidence against? Is there a different way of looking at things or is yours the only way? Are you looking at the situation through a negative filter? If so, only the negatives will pass through and the positives will be left out. When you learn to look at the situation from a rounded perspective rather than at an episodic level, you may be able to see more clearly and reject the filtered thinking for a more appropriate view.

2. Black or white thinking: Life is never either black or white. There are

various shades of grey in between and all our situations, achievements, objectives, goals and so on may fall somewhere on this spectrum. But a person with this distortion may sometimes fail to understand this. So, he is either perfect, or a complete failure. There is no in-between. Thus, if your mind tells you that you should either have a complete fairy-tale romance or not at all, you may be disregarding a good relationship just because there may be some struggle that you may be going through. Or, if your mind says that either your partner is perfect in all attributes or your partner is no good, you may be disregarding what you are getting for what you are not.

You may need to develop a realistic view in life for cognitive restructuring in this distortion. If you work on the premise that you are perfect and deserve perfection, you may be allowing this distortion to win. Your ROCD may make you feel that you are the centre of the universe and deserve nothing but the best. But you may need to realize that you have your own flaws and are yet accepted by your partner. You may need to develop the attitude of being willing to give more than you get.

Conversely, if you think you have to be perfect and you are not allowed to make any mistakes, you may be a victim of this distortion too. If, however, you realize that it is alright, and even healthy, for you to be imperfect and to make mistakes sometimes, you may be able to release yourself from this cage that you have trapped yourself into. The pressure to either always be perfect or else have low self-worth will be lifted and you may be able to accept yourself a lot more.

3. Overgeneralization: Based on one bad experience with a girl, if someone decides that all women are cheats and undependable, he may be a victim of the cognitive distortion of overgeneralizing. He may not be making allowance for the fact that other girls may not be that way. This may lead to disappointment and resentment and possible shutting down of avenues which he could have explored.

Or if after a breakup someone says '*it happens only with me – I never catch a good break*', he may have fallen prey to overgeneralization as well. He may not be open to the idea that her generalization is not true. Particularly in ROCD, if you think that your partner always reaches for your dates late, or never compliments you, you may be overgeneralizing.

In this case, you may need to look at the situation mindfully and arrive at a more accurate perspective. Is it really true that *all* women are undependable? Or is it possible that there are some women who are loyal and truthful as well? Is it also true that there are some men who are cheats and undependable too? Would it be fair to brand all men as cheats, in that case? Also, is it true that it *always* happens *only* with me? Or have there been times when I have actually had good breaks? Have I not seen others having bad breaks? Is such an absolute statement actually true? Finally, is it really true that my partner always reaches late or never compliments me or am I exaggerating and overgeneralizing? An accurate assessment of these absolute statements may help us realign our thinking to a more correct position.

4. Jumping to conclusions: When we end up making decisions without considering all possibilities or all variables, we may be victims of the cognitive distortion called jumping to conclusions. There may not be sufficient evidence to prove the conclusion that we may have arrived at. This distortion often manifests itself in one of two types – mind reading or future seeing.

For example, if you make a grammatical mistake while you are with your partner's friends, you may end up thinking – everyone must be laughing at me behind my back, thinking *'What a doofus I am and my partner thinks less of me because of it'*, it would be an example of mind reading. If this makes you think that your partner may break up with you because of a mistake like that, it would be an example of future seeing.

Since these thoughts may lead to an estimation of whether your relationship will succeed or fail and determine your actions, it would be wise to challenge these negative thoughts. You may once again, need to take stock of all the evidence you have.

In the case of mind reading, you may ask yourself questions like *'Am I the only one who has ever made a grammatical mistake? Was the mistake so terrible that it would make people laugh at me? Do I have any evidence that people are laughing at me? Do I have evidence that my partner thinks less of me because of this?'* In the case of future seeing, you could ask yourself *'Is my mistake really reason enough for my partner to break up with me? Do I have any evidence at all that my feeling will necessarily come true?'* Getting correct responses to these questions may help you in dealing with this cognitive distortion better.

5. Catastrophizing: Catastrophizing is taking a minor incident and blowing it out of proportion – imagining the worst possible outcome where any number of possibilities may exist. For example, if your partner has not invited you to an office party, instead of considering the possibility that it may not be a couples' event, you may choose to believe that people at your partner's office do not like you, and they may be poisoning your partner's mind against you, as a result of which your partner may lose interest in you and break up with you. This may lead you to feel depressed about yourself.

To deal with this, ask yourself this simple question *'Even though what I think is a possibility, what really is the probability that it will actually come true?'* You may realize, again when you put all the evidence together, that even though the possibility exists, the probability of something like that coming true is minuscule. There could be several reasons why your partner did not take you to the office party, and not being liked by his colleagues may not even come close to the real reason. So, is the assumption that you are making even remotely true?

6. Personalization: Personalization is when you think that you are totally or partially responsible for everything bad that happens around you, including acts of

God. For example, if your partner is in a foul mood, you may believe that it may be because of something you have done. Your mind may not allow you to consider the possibility that your partner's bad mood may be because of an argument at work and may have nothing to do with you.

Once again, this is a result of not looking at the various possibilities and only choosing to pick the one that causes the most anxiety. When you are a little more mindful of the other possibilities and choose not to dwell on that one possibility that seems real, despite lack of evidence, you may be able to better handle the distortion.

7. Control fallacy: Control fallacy refers to the distorted thinking related to control. It may manifest in two ways. You may have the feeling that you control situations around you and hence are responsible or the feeling that you are not able to control situations at all. You may disregard the importance of external factors in any event. For example, thinking that you (and only you) are responsible for your partner's happiness is a control fallacy. So, you may do everything you think will make your partner happy, and may make her feel smothered.

On the flip side, thinking that only your partner is responsible for your happiness or that your partner is responsible only for your happiness is also control fallacy. In case someone cheats on his partner, or is abusive towards his partner and states that if she had taken more steps to keep him happy, he would not have acted that way, it is a control fallacy. Insight is important in identification of control fallacy and disallowing it to govern your decisions and actions.

8. Fallacy of fairness: When you feel that the world is not being fair to you, even though you have given your best to the world, you may be experiencing this cognitive distortion. This distortion may make you feel that it is only right that you should be treated better than you think you are. When that does not happen, it may upset you.

For example, if I lend you an umbrella when it is raining and you don't have one, I may automatically begin to assume that when I don't have an umbrella, you will lend me one. If you don't lend me an umbrella when I need one, I may be disappointed. As the saying goes – expecting the world to be nice to you just because you are nice is like expecting a lion to not eat you because you are vegetarian. The world will not always dance to my tunes. If I want to avoid disappointment, I need to recognize that.

In the case of ROCD, if you feel the need to confess to your partner every time you see an attractive girl, and get upset that your partner does not confess to you every time she sees an attractive male, the fallacy of fairness may be governing your thoughts. In such cases, recognizing that it is not necessary for your partner to have the same habits as you, and allowing her to be comfortable in her own ways will help you deal with the fallacy of fairness.

9. Blaming: When we choose not to own up for something that goes wrong

and shift responsibility on to others, we refer to it as blaming. We could blame either some other person, or some situation. For example, if you skip a class and go for a movie with your partner and tell her that she made you miss your class because of the movie, you are blaming her. What you need to acknowledge is that you went for the movie with your partner because you wanted to. You knew very well that the class will be missed. You did not want to risk your partner going for the movie with another man. Hence blaming her is unfair to her.

We have control over our actions and we need to take responsibility for them. We are not responsible for anyone else's happiness, but conversely, no one else is important for ours either. The responsibility lies squarely on our shoulders. The sooner we recognize it, the better we will be able to deal with this.

10. Shoulds: Also called 'rigid rule keeping', this is a situation when we have a list of rules about the way things should be. If things aren't the way we want them to be, it affects us. If we have these rules for ourselves, it upsets us, if we break any of them. When we create rules for ourselves and for others that do not have a basis in logic, but are more out of stubbornness, we may end up making ourselves miserable or angry when the rules are not followed.

For example, if you believe that your partner *should* want to spend all her free time with you, or if you believe that you *should* not be thinking about other girls when you are with your partner, you are engaging in rigid rule keeping. Understanding that the words 'should', 'must', 'ought to', and 'have to' constrain us and make us rigid, can help us deal with this distortion better.

11. Emotional reasoning: 'I feel it, therefore it must be true'. When we are not able to separate fact from feeling and think that whatever we feel is actually true, we may let emotional reasoning get the better of us. If you feel that your partner may leave you for some other man, despite knowing that she loves you and is loyal to you, you may be allowing emotional reasoning to cloud your judgment. The feeling here is that your partner may leave you. The fact is that you know she will not leave you. But you choose to let the feeling decide the course of action and not the facts of the situation. The solution to this distortion is to be mindful about separating fact from feeling and be able to operate from the fact mindset, rather than the feeling mindset.

12. Fallacy of change: When we think that if we pressurize people enough, or cajole them enough, they will change and see our point of view, we are engaging in the fallacy of change. Sometimes persuasion works. But at other times, it may backfire. We hear of instances when girls beg their boyfriends to not leave them, or vice versa. Or when they have already been dumped, beg them to come back. When the ex-partner doesn't relent, the affected person finds it difficult to handle the rejection. The affected person may want to change the ex-partner's mind for what she thinks is the right reason, but the ex-partner may not look at it that way.

At some level, most people may be aware of some cognitive distortions at

OVERCOMING ROCD

play in their lives, even if they can't name them. They may still be unable to change themselves. So, if changing yourself is so difficult, imagine how successful you would be at trying to change someone else. Trying to change the other person's views by forcing her to necessarily see things from your point of view may have the opposite effect. Realizing this may help you have a better view of the situation. You can learn to temper your persuasive ways with space, or after a point, give up your coercive ways.

As can be seen, sometimes multiple cognitive distortions work together to contort our worldviews for us. In the interest of our own mental wellbeing, it is important to know about these distortions and make sure that they are properly identified, dealt with, and eliminated.

Worksheet 6 has been provided to practice cognitive restructuring. Fill it in regularly as a way of restructuring your thinking as a habit and you will find your cognition changing over a period of time.

In the next chapter, we shall understand the concept of ERP.

To-Do:

Complete WS6 - cognitive restructuring