

## Meet Your Mental Enemies: Part Two

(A 3-part series)

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Welcome back to part two of my three-part-series about cognitive distortions, aka: **Your Mental Enemies!** For those of you that would like to read part 1 in its entirety (which I highly recommend), please visit our website at [mccaskillfamilyservices.com](http://mccaskillfamilyservices.com) and visit our blog underneath the “resources” tab. There, you will find part one and many other helpful therapy tools and info from our MFS staff.

For brevity's sake, I am discussing the 6 most common cognitive distortions that I see when working with clients. However, there are many, many, more distorted thought patterns that exist in the psychology world. So, if you catch yourself in an unhelpful thought pattern, and you don't see it appear on this list, don't worry! If it feels unhelpful, it likely is unhelpful, regardless if its job is not a full-time cognitive distortion. In part three, we will discuss the “3 C's of CBT”, which is an empirically support method for helping us alter these thought patterns. Knowing/recognizing the thought is the first step in this method, so let's learn about a few more distortions that show up frequently in our brains.

**All or Nothing Thinking:** This cognitive distortion is sometimes referred to as “Black and White” thinking. It divides experiences into two separate, binary categories, that are usually very opposite of each other. When we engage in all or nothing thinking patterns, we are essentially saying there are only two options: “good or bad”, “right or wrong”, “success or failure.” In reality, most of us live our lives somewhere in the middle, moving fluidly between these opposite. If we are sticking with the color theme, most of us live in “the grey.” All or nothing thinking can prevent us from thinking outside of the box and promotes an unbalanced, biased perspective. It is very common mental enemy for those who struggle with perfectionism.



Situation: You get a B on your final exam when you were hoping for an A.

Mental Enemy Says: “*You failed that test. You're so stupid.*”

Cognitive Conqueror: Technically, you didn't fail. You got a B, and a B.. well... is a B. It may not be what you were hoping for, but it is not a failure. Otherwise, you would've been marked as such. Just because you were not perfect does not mean that you failed. There are a lot of other letter grades that separate a B from an F!

**Using “Should” or “Must” Words:** Using critical words like “should”, “must” or “ought” usually lead to feelings of guilt or frustration. These words are considered distorted because they are filled with implicit messaging and unrealistic expectations of the situation. We aren't noticing the unsaid message whispering , “I should've been able to hold my temper... **but I didn't**” or “I ought to go the gym.. **but I won't have time**” making us feel like failures without acknowledging the reality of the human experience. You will not always be able to hold your temper, and sometimes the gym gets de-prioritized. Just because you have experienced a different outcome than you expected of yourself, does not suggest that you have done anything wrong or broken a promise to yourself.

Situation: You are on your way to your weekly therapy appointment, and you get stuck in unexpected accident traffic. You are definitely going to be late!

Mental Enemy Says: *"You should've left the house sooner. Why can't you ever plan ahead?"*

Cognitive Conqueror: Did you know that there was going to be an accident? Do you map out the same 20-minute route every week before you go to therapy? The answer to both of these questions is a resounding "no." If you know how long it takes you to get somewhere, it isn't instinctual to check to see if there is traffic (especially when you're going to the same place, every week, at the same time! You already know the regular traffic patterns and what to expect). This mental enemy is making you feel like you did something wrong, when really you didn't. The traffic was an unforeseeable circumstance. Acceptance-based practices can be super helpful here, *"It is what it is, and it is beyond my control."*

PS: Your therapist also totally understands.

Disqualifying the positive: This mental enemy puts the blinders on anything positive that you do. It creates false reasons of why that good deed wasn't really that great after all. It makes you feel like all the chores you accomplished around the house today, well, they don't really count because YOU were the one that made the mess (so of course you have to be the one to clean it up). Your brain encourages you to reject positive experiences by chalking the reason you were successful up to anything but your efforts: luck, ease of the task, requirement/obligation, others going "easy" on you, etc.

Situation: Your friend asks you to volunteer with her this weekend at a soup kitchen. You go for a few hours and have a great time together.

Mental Enemy Says: *"It doesn't count if it wasn't your idea. You only went because your friend asked you too. You just wanted to see your friend."*

Cognitive Conqueror: I can think of many other things that you could've done with your time over that weekend. You could have declined the invite, or you could have asked your friend to go to the movies instead. Ultimately, you chose to volunteer. By showing up, you positively impacted other peoples' lives regardless of your motive. Your act of kindness counts, especially to them.

Tune in next month for our final part of this series, where we discuss how to effectively fight off these mental enemies and become your own, mentally strong, cognitive conqueror.

