

Meet Your Mental Enemies: Cognitive Distortions

(A 3-part series)

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Lee Atwater described it best when he said, “Our perception is our reality.” What Lee was trying to express with this sentiment is that *what* we think about and *how* we think about it becomes our truth over time. Our brain will believe what we tell it, and even if what we tell it is factually incorrect, it will still believe it as truth. Our brains are not always wrong, but they are very primitive beings. They exist (mostly) to help keep us alive and function appropriately. Because they have loyalties to our safety, they have a tendency to forget that we are no longer living in the stone age, and that the world is a much safer place than it used to be. Many of us are privileged in the USA to no longer have to worry about famine, disease and getting expelled from our tribe (which likely meant death during that time). However, our brain still automatically functions in this way (it can’t help it!) and this can cause increased anxiety, amongst other issues, in places where it doesn’t need to be present.

Additionally, if you have been diagnosed with anxiety, depression, OCD, an eating disorder, etc. we know there is also a biological component negatively impacting the brain via an under or over production of neurotransmitters necessary for optimal functioning. People that struggle with these diagnoses (in addition to their primitive brain) may have decreased accuracy in how they interpret situations. Add in other factors that influence our thinking and behavior such as operant and classic conditioning (shaping through repetition and learning), interpersonal relationships/attachments, other life experiences and BOOM! You have a trifecta of sticky thought patterns that show up automatically. This trifecta is the synergistic relationship between our psychology, biology and our environment that ultimately impacts our perception.



In psychology, we refer to these sticky and inaccurate thought patterns as cognitive distortions. These thoughts show up intrusively and are distorted via one (or several) parts of the trifecta I mentioned above. Despite them being incorrect, we believe them as truth. For example, if you meet someone new and your first thought after shaking their hand is, “*They don’t like me*” that is a cognitive distortion. This thought is potentially inaccurate, since we have little evidence based on a handshake that someone does not like us. Somehow though, we convince ourselves that this thought represents the reality of the situation and therefore experience heightened anxiety. In this 3-part series, I am going to introduce you to some of the most common cognitive distortions that my patients experience, and then teach you an empirically supported method for combating these mental enemies (aka: the cognitive conquerors!).

Let’s meet these enemies:

The Mind Reader: This mental enemy is one of the most common cognitive distortions I see in practice, especially if you struggle with anxiety or depression. Mind reading is just what it sounds like: this distortion **convinces us** that we have become psychic and can read other people’s minds! It makes us feel like we know what other people are thinking and feeling. Without having much evidence to support these thoughts, this mental enemy causes us to think and believe things that may not be true.

Situation: Two people walk by, and you see them whispering and giggling in your direction.

Mental Enemy Says: “*They are talking about you and making fun of you.*”

Cognitive Conqueror: There could be many other reasons why they are laughing. Maybe they are recalling a funny memory they have together or laughing about a scene from a movie.

Catastrophizing: This cognitive distortion causes us to focus on the worst possible outcome of a situation. We struggle to see that instead of one possible, awful outcome, there may be several other possibilities about how something may turn out, and some of those may not even be bad! Our primitive brain tends to focus on and expect the worst outcome as a way to prepare and protect ourselves. This mental enemy may also pop up when something bad DOES happen and it tricks you into catastrophizing the event, *“This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me!”*

Example: During your quarterly performance review, your boss gives you a “2 (good)” instead of a “3 (great)” for an overall score.

Mental Enemy Says: *“This couldn’t get any worse. I am definitely getting fired next quarter.”*

Cognitive Conqueror: Actually, it could be worse! You could’ve gotten a 1! A 2 doesn’t seem like grounds for termination, especially when it is an average score. There’s no way to know if you will get fired next quarter, but the odds will be in your favor if you continue to do your best. A 2 is still a pretty good score, and there will be time and opportunity to positively impact it before next quarter.

Overgeneralization: This mental enemy sees a pattern based on a single event, causing us to be overly broad in the conclusions that we draw. You can often see this enemy in conjunction with definitive and all-encompassing words such as, *“nothing”* *“always”* *“everything.”* This is a very common cognitive distortion associated with depression, as it causes us to take a negative event and assume it has meaning that pervades our whole life.

Example: You miss the winning hockey goal in over-time.



Mental Enemy Says: *“I missed that hockey goal. I am never going to succeed at anything.”*

Cognitive Conqueror: Missing a hockey goal and failing at life? Those are two very different things that don’t directly correlate. In robot terms, *“Does not Compute.”* Maybe you missed the big goal because you were having an off day, or maybe you missed it because you aren’t a great hockey player, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t other things in your life that you will succeed at. Overgeneralization is causing you to forget all your past and current successes, while tricking you into believing you are incapable of growth.

The first place to start when it comes to battling cognitive distortions is simply noticing when these mental enemies rear their ugly heads. Once they have been spotted, only then we can figure out what to do with them. See if you can spot these over the next few weeks, and tune in next month for part 2 of this series!