

THINKING ERRORS

Psychiatrists Aaron T. Beck, David D. Burns, and others have developed lists of thinking errors called “cognitive distortions.” Some common ones are summarized below.

THINKING ERROR	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Black-and-white thinking	Seeing things in extreme terms	“If I do poorly on this exam, I’m a total idiot.”
Shoulding	Thinking the way we want things to be is the way they ought to be	“I should have been more patient.”
Overgeneralization	Believing that one instance applies to every situation	“I don’t know the answer to the first question on this exam, so I’m probably not going to know the answers to any questions.”
Catastrophizing	Thinking a situation is much worse than it is	“A customer got really mad at me today, so my boss will probably fire me.”
Discounting the positive	Minimizing evidence that contradicts one’s negative automatic thoughts	“She said ‘yes’ when I asked her out only because she felt sorry for me.”
Emotional reasoning	Assuming our feelings convey useful information	“My nervousness about flying means there’s a good chance my plane will crash.”

THINKING ERROR	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Fortune telling	Making predictions based on scant information	“The rental company probably won’t have any cars left.”
Mind reading	Assuming we know what someone else is thinking	“They probably thought I looked like an idiot when I couldn’t get my slides to load.”
Personalization	Thinking events that have nothing to do with us are actually about us	“She seems upset—it’s probably because of something I did.”
Entitlement	Expecting to reach a certain outcome based on our actions or position	“I deserve to be promoted after working so hard.”
Outsourcing happiness	Giving outside factors the final say regarding our emotions	“I can’t be happy unless others give me the respect I deserve.”
False sense of helplessness	Believing we have less power than we actually do	“There’s no point in applying for jobs—nobody’s going to hire me.”
False sense of responsibility	Believing we have more power than we actually do	“If I were a more interesting speaker, nobody would ever yawn during my talks.”