



## The Cognitive Distortion Scale

### Opening Exercise – *Dizzy Cognitions*

**Directions:** Read and discuss the scenarios in each box, which emphasize cognitive distortions. As a group answer and discuss the questions for each one. Feel free to stop and discuss if anyone in the group has had a similar experience for each one.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Lack of Evidence</b></p> <p>Jerry was extremely worried about his upcoming exam. Jerry thought to himself, "If I don't get an A on this test, my life is over."</p> <p><i>Is there real evidence that Jerry's life will be over if he does not get an A?</i></p> <p><i>What likely is the more accurate truth about what will happen if Jerry does not get an A</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Assumption</b></p> <p>Tyesha had an important question to ask her boss, but her boss had not been in. She left a message for her boss to call her when she is back. It's been two days so far, but there has not been a call. Tyesha says to herself "My boss has not called, so she must be mad at me."</p> <p><i>What assumption is Tyesha making and what are some legitimate reasons why her assumption may be false?</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Illogical Thinking</b></p> <p>Pedro ran his best race against a very competitive field yesterday and he came in second. Pedro had his heart set on winning, so he kept thinking to himself "I was not the best, so I am a complete failure."</p> <p><i>How does Pedro's reasoning lack logic?</i></p> <p><i>What is a more logical way to view Pedro's situation?</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Feelings Driven Thinking</b></p> <p>Terri tried to participate in a conversation with a group of coworkers at lunch and she was not exactly sure about the topic they were discussing so she kept quiet. Upset, Terri thought to herself the rest of the day "I felt stupid so I must really be stupid."</p> <p><i>How is it that Terri's feelings are misleading her to say something that is not true?</i></p> <p><i>What is a more accurate statement about the situation?</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Unrealistic Thinking</b></p> <p>Liam was making great progress in his outpatient treatment program, and he was especially proud of how well he was managing his anger. However, in an unexpected stressful situation at work, Liam lost his cool and got into an argument with one of his coworkers. Liam spent the next week mentally beating himself up saying "I should be able to handle everything perfectly without any mistakes."</p> <p><i>How is Liam's thinking based on unrealistic expectations and what is a more realistic way to view his situation?</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Exaggeration</b></p> <p>Graham's wife is an accountant, and it is tax season, and he knows that she will be working late for a few weeks. However, Graham and his wife now have newborn twins in the home. Graham complained to his wife, "I cannot handle you working late this year, this is just unbearable and impossible for me to manage."</p> <p><i>Considering that Graham is both a healthy and capable parent, how is his statement a distorted view based on an exaggeration of reality?</i></p>



### **Not Giving the Benefit of the Doubt**

Elaine confided in her friend about an embarrassing secret. Later that day, Elaine saw her friend giggling and laughing with a group of other people. Elaine thought to herself “She betrayed me about my secret, and she is going to pay for it” Elaine spent the rest of the evening feeling depressed and angry.

The next day Elaine found out the group was laughing about a TV show and not about her secret.

*Why is it important to give the benefit of the doubt when you don't have all the facts?*

### **Narrow Focus**

Clint's annual review came up and he got the report. In reading the feedback about his performance everything he read was positive and complimentary. However, in the end, there was one small point of constructive criticism. Clint was depressed all weekend because he obsessively focused on the one point of criticism while ignoring the multiple other points of praise.

*How can a narrow focus cause faulty and problematic thinking?*

### **Pessimistic/Negative Viewpoint**

Lou was doing so well in his recovery, but he relapsed. Instead of hiding it, Lou signed himself up for an outpatient program, and started going back to NA meetings. Then Lou voluntarily went and told his family about what happened. Lou's family was proud of his honesty, but Lou could not stop beating himself up over the relapse as he ignored all of the good things that came out of it afterward.

*Why is important and helpful to focus on the positives even during negative experiences?*

### **Subjective Reasoning**

Mo went on a date and the conversation was pleasant with both Mo and the date freely sharing personal stories and interests. However, after the date, Mo reasoned “that person doesn't like me” based on the thought that the person did not outwardly express strong romantic interest right away so that must automatically mean that they are not interested.

*How and why is this reasoning problematic and potentially very misleading?*



## The Cognitive Distortion Scale

**Intro** – Cognitive distortions are habitual ways our minds deceive us, leading to inaccurate perceptions of reality. These distortions can significantly impact our emotions and behaviors, contributing to stress and negatively influencing our mental health. Cognitive distortions are irrational and biased thought patterns that can lead to inaccurate and highly misleading perceptions of situations and experiences. They often arise automatically, influencing the way we interpret events and interact with the world around us. Identifying these distortions is a crucial step toward developing healthier thinking habits and positive behaviors.

**Part I – Prepare Yourself** – It is important to get into the right mindset to cope with cognitive distortions. Take a deep breath and use whatever coping skills you already have, to help calm your mind. It is important to be relaxed and rational when thinking about cognitive distortions in order to be honest and objective with ourselves and our thinking.

**Think of this process like snorkeling. There are several parallels:**

To see underwater when snorkeling helps when the water is **calm and clear**. When looking into our own mind we can see so much more when our mind is **calm and clear**. Ripples in the water create more distortions which impede our view.

The snorkel itself is a tool that keeps air coming in. It is important to breathe to manage emotions and keep things calm and rational when looking inside ourselves.

Finally, goggles enhance underwater vision when snorkeling. When looking into our minds to dispel cognitive distortions we need to put on our figurative goggles which are special lenses for introspection. It can take practice to learn to look through these lenses of introspection, self-awareness, and insight to effectively look into our own minds to see what is really in there.



**For group discussion: *What skills and techniques do you know of that help you calm and prepare your mind to think and reason clearly and accurately?***



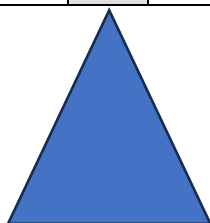
## Identifying Cognitive Distortions: *Weighing Thoughts on the Scales*

### The Cognitive Distortion Balance Scale:

#### ACCURATE REALITY

#### DISTORTED REALITY

Evidence		Assumption	
Rational/Logic Driven		Feelings Driven	
Reliable and Valid		Exaggerated	
Broad Perspective (Big Picture)		Narrow Focus/Limited	
Objective		Subjective (Taking it personally)	
Benefit of the Doubt		Negative/Pessimistic	



To use the Cognitive Distortion Balance Scale, it is important to be able to honestly answer and “weigh” six different self-question areas to break down thoughts and identify accurate vs. distorted reality. Keep in mind, this process may seem like a lot at first but the idea behind this is that if you practice “weighing” things out in your mind with these introspective questions, over time this process will become almost automatic in your head. With time and effort by using this process of examining thoughts you will be able to prevent yourself from being subject to Cognitive Distortions. This process will then help with making informed decisions for improved decisions, behaviors, and outcomes in our recovery process. Consider the following **six self-question areas** below directly from the Cognitive Distortion Scale illustrated above.

#### 1. Evidence vs Assumption

- a. **Evidence** - *Ask yourself:* Do I have enough needed information to prove what I am thinking is true?
- b. **Assumption:** *Ask yourself:* Am I speculating or assuming by forming a guess about this situation without firm evidence?

#### 2. Logic Driven vs Feelings Driven Thinking

- a. **Logic Driven** - *Ask yourself:* Am I effectively reasoning (using logic) about this situation?
- b. **Feelings-Driven Thinking** - *Ask yourself:* Are my emotions and feelings dominant or strong here and possibly misguiding my thinking?



### 3. Reliable vs Exaggerated.

- a. **Reliable** - *Ask yourself:* Am I utilizing reliable, trustworthy, and correct information to draw accurate conclusions?
- b. **Exaggerated** – *Ask yourself:* Am I possibly viewing things as larger, more meaningful, more intense or of greater importance than they really are?

### 4. Broad Perspective vs Narrow Focus

- a. **Broad Perspective** – *Ask yourself:* Am I looking at this “from a wide angle” and considering the “big picture?”
- b. **Narrow Focus** – *Ask yourself:* Am I limiting my perspective to just seeing just part of the picture and perhaps leaving some important parts out?

### 5. Objective vs Subjective

- a. **Objective** – *Ask yourself:* Am I doing my best to be impartial and avoid personal bias?
- b. **Subjective** – *Ask yourself:* Am I taking this personally and allowing my own unfounded opinions and interpretations to take precedence?

### 6. Giving the Benefit of the Doubt vs Overly Negative/Pessimistic Thinking

- a. **Benefit of the Doubt** – *Ask yourself:* Until I have clear evidence, can I lean toward the positive rather than assume the worst?
- b. **Negative/Pessimistic Thinking** – *Ask yourself:* Am I simply choosing to be negative even though I don't really know the truth for sure?



## The Cognitive Distortion Scale in Practice - An Example:

### Monty's Story:

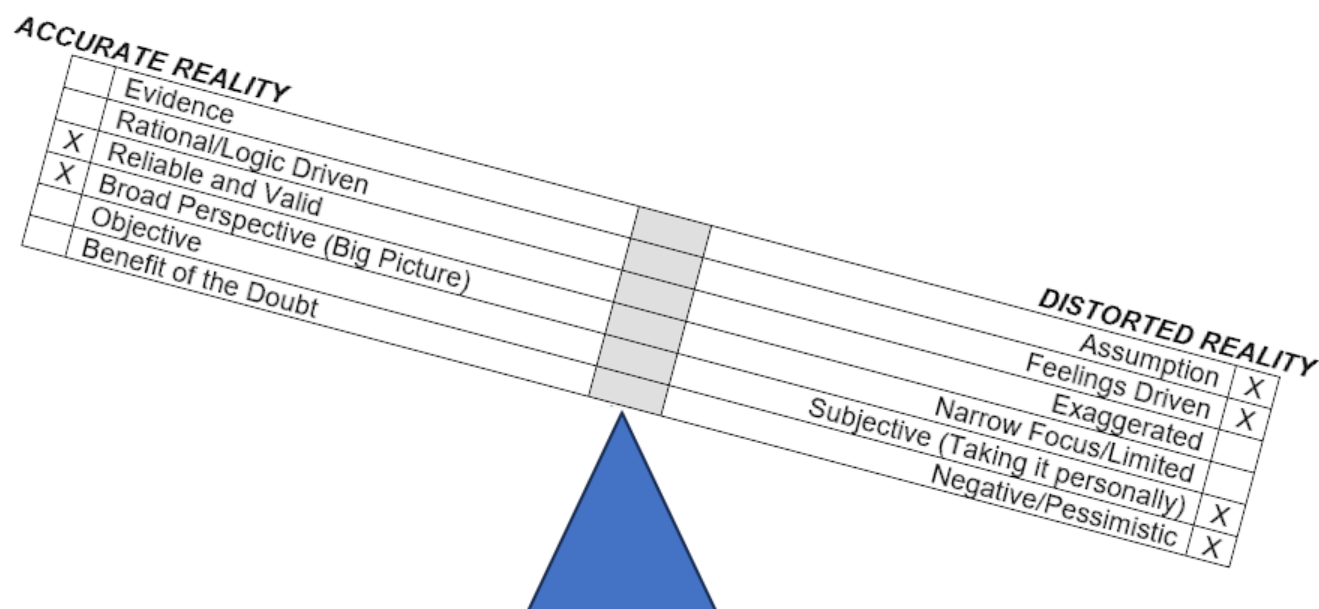
Monty spent most of his teens and adult life using drugs regularly with untreated mental illness, causing extensive life problems. Monty is currently experiencing his first sustained effort with positive change and recovery. One issue Monty continues to struggle with on a daily basis is *insecurity*. When working with his counselor, Monty calmed his mind and gave insightful focus on what thoughts are fueling his feelings of ongoing insecurity. Monty identified the following pervasive thought in his mind:

***"I feel like no matter how hard I try I am going to end up falling short or even failing."***

Monty worked with his counselor and his group, using the Cognitive Distortion Scale and he came up with the following conclusions based on the six self-questions outlined above. (Keep in mind, Monty is new to recovery and new to this process so not every conclusion he came up with is fully accurate however the Cognitive Distortion Scale still was able to show him that this thought above is "DISTORTED REALITY"). Here are his conclusions from the six self-question areas:

1. There is no real current evidence supporting his insecure thoughts of failure but rather it is more of an assumption.
2. Monty realized this thought is more feeling driven than logic driven.
3. Still Monty felt his reasoning is valid based on his history of many past struggles and failures when he was actively using drugs for all of those years previously.
4. Monty still felt he was taking a broad perspective rather than being narrow in focus.
5. Monty was able to acknowledge the subjective nature of his thinking and that he lacked objectivity.
6. Monty also realized he is being overly pessimistic rather than trying more to be positive.

**See Monty's conclusions when "weighed" on the Cognitive Distortion Scale below.**







Do not be alarmed if this seems complicated because with time it becomes simple and even automatic. Here are the three basic conclusions to take away from this analysis of the Cognitive Distortion Scale:

- **By first calming our minds we can prepare ourselves for open and honest introspection of our real thoughts and feelings. This is a very worthwhile practice for self-growth and positive change.**
- **Once we are prepared, we can identify thoughts and feelings that are troubling us. It is helpful to be able to state them or write them out in an honest thought/feeling statement.**
- **Then, we can ask ourselves the questions as outlined in the Cognitive Distortion Scale and come up with honest answers to determine if our thinking is accurate and realistic or if we are allowing distorted thinking to guide our minds and our behavior.**

Finally, this is perhaps most important step:

**REFRAME – Ask yourself: *How can I restate my thought in a more accurate manner?***

When we realize our thinking is distorted, we can correct it through **cognitive reframing**. The goal is to replace these negative and inaccurate thinking patterns with more positive and realistic ones. This will ultimately change our emotional response and then our behavior for the better.

Monty's thought reframed:

- Old thought from earlier (Distorted and negative) - ***“I feel like no matter how hard I try I am going to end up falling short or even failing.”***
- Reframed thought (Realistic and positive) – ***“I have had my share of struggles in the past, but I am making positive changes now and even if I face more challenges, I will eventually be successful in achieving my goals if keep on trying.”***
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**Can you see how cognitive reframing is helpful?**

***Final discussion:***

***Does anyone in the group want to share a negative thinking pattern that is troubling them?***

As a group work through the items on the Cognitive Distortion Scale to identify how the thinking may be unrealistic and distorted. Then as a group work to reframe these thoughts into a much more positive and hopeful reality that will guide positive and productive future feelings and behaviors.



## **Additional Resources for Counselors and Others – Traditional Cognitive Distortion List:**

Cognitive distortions are patterns of biased thinking that can contribute to negative emotions and behaviors. Here are some introspective questions that someone can ask themselves to identify if they might be engaging in cognitive distortions:

### **1. All-or-Nothing Thinking (Black-and-White Thinking):**

- Am I viewing this situation in extremes, without considering any middle ground?
- Am I using words like "always" or "never" to describe the situation?

### **2. Overgeneralization:**

- Am I making sweeping conclusions based on a single incident?
- Is there evidence to support my belief, or am I assuming things without reason?

### **3. Filtering (Selective Attention):**

- Am I focusing only on the negative aspects of the situation?
- Have I overlooked positive or neutral aspects that could provide balance?

### **4. Mind Reading:**

- Am I assuming I know what others are thinking without clear evidence?
- Have I asked for clarification or confirmation of their thoughts?

### **5. Catastrophizing (Magnification or Minimization):**

- Am I blowing things out of proportion or minimizing the importance of positive events?
- What is the realistic likelihood of the worst-case scenario happening?

### **6. Personalization:**

- Am I blaming myself for things beyond my control?
- Have I considered other factors that may be contributing to the situation?

### **7. Should Statements:**

- Am I imposing unrealistic expectations on myself or others?
- Are these "should" statements based on personal values or societal norms?

### **8. Emotional Reasoning:**

- Am I assuming that because I feel a certain way, it must be true?
- Have I considered alternative perspectives or evidence?





#### **9. Labeling and Mislabeled:**

- Am I attaching negative labels to myself, or others based on specific behaviors?
- Is this label an accurate representation of the overall person or situation?

#### **10. Discounting Positives:**

- Am I dismissing positive experiences or achievements as insignificant?
- Have I acknowledged and celebrated my successes?

#### **11. Control Fallacies:**

- Am I feeling overly responsible for events outside of my control?
- Do I believe I have no control over my emotional reactions?

#### **12. The Fallacy of Fairness:**

- Am I expecting life to be fair all the time?
- Have I considered that fairness is subjective and not always achievable?

#### **13. Blaming:**

- Am I placing blame on myself or others without considering multiple factors?
- Have I explored the role of external circumstances in the situation?

#### **14. Shouldering (Burden of Responsibility):**

- Am I taking on more responsibility than is reasonable or necessary?
- Have I considered sharing responsibilities with others?

#### **15. Comparisons:**

- Am I comparing myself unfavorably to others?
- Have I acknowledged my own unique strengths and achievements?

#### **16. Always Being Right:**

- Am I insisting on being right even when it's causing conflict?
- Have I considered alternative perspectives and the possibility of being wrong?

#### **17. Heaven's Reward Fallacy:**

- Am I expecting that my sacrifices or efforts will always be rewarded?
- Have I considered the unpredictable nature of life?



#### **18. Tunnel Vision:**

- Am I focusing excessively on one negative aspect while ignoring the bigger picture?
- Have I considered the broader context of the situation?

#### **19. Just World Hypothesis:**

- Do I believe that good things only happen to good people and vice versa?
- Have I recognized that life is unpredictable and doesn't always follow a moral formula?

#### **20. Negative Fortune Telling:**

- Am I predicting negative outcomes without evidence?
- Have I considered more optimistic possibilities?

These questions can help us explore thought patterns and identify cognitive distortions that may be influencing our emotions and behaviors. Encouraging a balanced and realistic perspective is key to addressing and challenging these distortions.



## **Socratic Questioning**

Socratic questioning is a technique derived from the Socratic method, a form of cooperative argumentative dialogue to stimulate critical thinking. In the context of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), people use Socratic questioning to explore and challenge their thoughts, beliefs, and assumptions. The goal is to encourage self-discovery and promote a deeper understanding of one's cognitive processes.

*Here's a comprehensive list of Socratic questions across various categories:*

### **Questions for Clarity and Understanding:**

1. What do you mean by...?
2. Can you provide an example?
3. How does this relate to...?
4. What is the main point?
5. Can you rephrase that in your own words?

### **Questions for Probing Assumptions:**

6. What assumptions are you making?
7. How do you know this is true?
8. Are there any counterexamples?
9. What if the opposite were true?
10. What are you taking for granted?

### **Questions about Evidence and Support:**

11. What evidence supports this?
12. How reliable is the source?
13. Can you find more evidence?
14. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence?
15. Is there enough evidence to draw a conclusion?

### **Questions about Implications and Consequences:**

16. What are the implications of this?
17. What might happen next?
18. What are the consequences of that assumption?
19. How does this affect other areas?
20. What if this were to occur?



### **Questions for Exploring Viewpoints:**

21. What would someone who disagrees say?
22. Can you see it from another perspective?
23. How would someone with a different background interpret this?
24. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this viewpoint?
25. Are there any common ground or shared values?

### **Questions for Clarifying Concepts:**

26. Can you explain this further?
27. What does this mean in practical terms?
28. Can you give an analogy or metaphor?
29. How does this concept relate to others we've discussed?
30. Can you break this down into smaller parts?

### **Questions for Questioning the Question:**

31. Is this the most important question?
32. Why is this question important?
33. Are there other questions we should be asking?
34. What assumptions are embedded in the question?
35. How did we arrive at this question?

### **Meta-Questions (Questions about Questions):**

36. What are we trying to achieve with this question?
37. How did we arrive at this question?
38. Is there a better way to phrase this question?
39. What is the purpose of asking this question?
40. How does this question contribute to our understanding?

Socratic questioning is a dynamic process, and these questions are meant to guide thoughtful inquiry and foster critical thinking. Depending on the context, questions can be adapted and expanded to suit the specific situation or topic.