


Increasing Awareness of Cognitive Distortions

Mindfulness

 Intervention

 5-10 min.

 Client

 No

Cognitive distortions refer to biased ways of thinking about oneself and the world around us. There are many common forms of distorted thinking. Examples include excessive focusing on negatives to the exclusion of positives (“Nothing good ever happens to me”), discounting achievements (“I was just lucky”) and all-or-nothing thinking (“If I can’t get exactly what I want, I don’t want anything”). These and other irrational thoughts and beliefs can result in problematic emotional states and behaviour, including fear, depression, low self-esteem and aggression.

Therefore, it is important for clients to become aware of any distorted thinking patterns so that they can reduce their impact. By training clients to become aware of their irrational thoughts and beliefs, their ability to, distinguish thoughts from reality increases. As a consequence, irrational thoughts may still occur, but the client becomes better able to see them for what they are: mental stories as opposed to reality. This tool was developed to reduce the impact of distorted cognitions by dismantling them.

Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients recognize distorted thinking and reduce the negative impact of these thinking patterns.

Advice

- It is important to understand that the goal of this exercise is not to increase rational living or correct cognitive distortions by replacing one thought with another. Neither is the goal to eliminate emotions. This is simply impossible, as having an emotional life is part of the human experience. Rather, the goal is to increase the client’s awareness of the difference between reality and thoughts about reality. It is not the thought that is problematic, but the fact that the client believes the thought to be true. Or, stated differently, that the client identifies with the thought. By increasing the client’s ability to identify and observe his (distorted) thoughts, the client is expected to reduce their negative impact on well-being.
- This exercise can be a valuable addition for third-wave interventions, like mindfulness training or Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which aim to reduce the client’s identification with thoughts. Mindfulness exercises like the three-minute breathing space may be used in combination with this exercise. For instance, after experiencing an emotion, the three-minute breathing space may facilitate the observation of thoughts (decentring; Segal et al., 2002) that is needed to identify possible cognitive distortions. In line with this rationale, research has shown that meditation practice can reduce cognitive distortions (Sears, & Kraus, 2009).
- Note that in some cases, a certain belief can be a combination of different cognitive distortions. For instance, the belief “I said the wrong thing so they will never hire me.” Includes elements of both fortune telling and magnification.

- A recommended depth review of cognitive distortions about the self and research on this matter is provided by the book “Rational and irrational beliefs: Research, theory and clinical practice” by David, Lynn, and Ellis (2010).



Suggested Readings

Beck, A. T. (1976). *Cognitive therapies and emotional disorders*. New York: New American Library.

Burns, D. D. (1980). *Feeling good: The new mood therapy*. New York: New American Library.

David, D., Lynn, S., & Ellis, A. (Eds.). (2010). *Rational and irrational beliefs: Research, theory and clinical practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sears, S., & Kraus, S. (2009). I think therefore I Om: Cognitive distortions and coping style as mediators for the effects of mindfulness meditation on anxiety, positive and negative affect, and hope. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 65, 1–13.

Segal, Z. V., Williams, J. M., & Teasdale, J. D. (2002). *Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression: A new approach to preventing relapse*. New York: Guilford.

Tool Description

Instructions

Step 1: Understanding cognitive distortions

Cognitive distortions are ways that the mind convinces us of something that is not true. Although these thoughts may sound very convincing, they are simply not true and make us feel badly about ourselves or others.

For instance, a person might tell himself, “if I do not make it the first time, I will never make it.” This is an example of “black or white” (or polarized) thinking. The person is only seeing things in extremes — that if he fails at something the first time, he will fail at all future attempts. Learning to recognize your own cognitive distortions can help you to decrease their impact.

Table 1. shows a list of 11 common cognitive distortions. Please study the list so that you have a clear idea of the different ways in which our mind tries to convince us of something that is not true.

Table 1. Overview of 11 common cognitive distortions

<i>no.</i>	<i>Name of cognitive distortion</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples</i>
1.	All-or-Nothing Thinking	Seeing things in black-and-white categories.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ People are all good or all bad. ■ Projects are perfect or failures. ■ High caloric food is bad, Low caloric food is good.
2.	Overgeneralizing	Believing that something will always happen because it happened once.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I will never going to get a date, because I once got declined. ■ I will never be able to speak in public because I once had a panic attack before giving a speech.
3.	Discounting the Positive	Believing that if a good thing happens, it must not be important or does not count.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I passed the exam this time, but it was coincidence. ■ I did not have a panic attack today, but it is only because I was too busy to be worried.
4.	Jumping to Conclusions	Responding to a situation without having all the information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ He did not call me back because he thinks I am not qualified. ■ That person cut me off in traffic because he does not care about other people.
5.	Mind Reading	Believing that you know how someone else is feeling or what they are thinking without any evidence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I know she hates me. ■ That person thinks I'm a failure.

6.	Fortune telling	Believing that you can predict a future outcome, while ignoring other options.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ People will laugh at me when I present my ideas. ■ I am not going to pass this test.
7.	Magnifying (Catastrophizing) or Minimizing	Distorting the importance of positive and negative events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ My nose is so big that no one will ever find me attractive. ■ It doesn't matter if I'm smart because I will never be, popular. ■ I said the wrong thing so they will never hire me.
8.	Emotional Reasoning	Believing something to be true because it feels true.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I feel so anxious, so something bad is going to happen. ■ I am worthless because I feel worthless. ■ I feel guilty, therefore I must have done something bad.
9.	Should Statements	Telling yourself you should, should not, or should have done something when it is more accurate to say that you would have preferred or wished you had or had not done something.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I should not feel sad. ■ I should have done something to help him. ■ I should always be in time.
10.	Labelling and Mislabelling	Instead of describing behaviour, you use a label.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ He is a bad person (instead of "He lied.") ■ I am stupid (instead of "I failed for this test")
11.	Personalization	Taking blame for some negative event even though you were not primarily responsible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ It is my fault my husband hits me. ■ My son is unhappy because of me.

Step 2: Identifying your own cognitive distortions

Now you have a better understanding of what cognitive distortions are, it is time to become aware of your own cognitive distortions. The worksheet presented as Fig. 2 on page 6 can be used for this purpose.

As shown on the worksheet, there are three columns to track: feelings, thoughts and cognitive distortions. First, start by connecting to your present experience. What do you feel? Try to identify which emotion (e.g. anxiety, irritability, sadness, or shame) is present. Write the emotion in the first column labelled "Feelings." You can also write down any notable physical sensations, (e.g. muscular tension), as uncomfortable somatic states can be caused by problematic thinking as well.

Once you have identified what you are feeling, then notice what thoughts are running through your mind as you experience those emotions or physical sensations. This step helps you to gain more insight in the relationship between thoughts and feelings.

Finally, analyse your thoughts for any cognitive distortions. If you notice that your thinking reflects one or more cognitive distortions, write it/them down. If not, your perspective is likely to be rational and you are probably experiencing a normal emotional response to something difficult. An example of a completed worksheet is shown in Fig. 1

Fig. 1 Example of a completed worksheet

<i>Feelings:</i>	<i>Thoughts:</i>	<i>Cognitive Distortion?</i>
anxious, worried, shoulders tense	"I know I'm going to fail that exam"	Fortune teller/jumping to conclusions

Try to spend 5-10 minutes each day working on this exercise for at least one week. It is important that you actually write out the information. Simply thinking about it is often insufficient for this exercise to be effective. Putting the information down on paper provides perspective and clarity.

Fig. 2 Worksheet

[illegible]

Step 3: Reflection

How was it to do this exercise?

What did you learn from this exercise?

Take a look at the completed worksheet. Are there cognitive distortions that seem to happen more often than others? If so, which ones?

What could you do to reduce the impact of your cognitive distortions?