



# iflow Psychology

## Information Sheet

*Supporting mental health, resilience, and wellbeing*

---

www.iflowpsychology.com.au | Gladesville, NSW | (02) 6061 1144

---

### Faulty Cognitive Filters

#### How Our Thinking Shapes Our Reality

Author: Dean Harrison — Counselling Psychologist /  
Managing Director, iflow Psychology

---

Our circumstances do not define us—our thinking patterns do. Two people can experience very different reactions to hardship: one may remain hopeful despite profound suffering, while another may become overwhelmed by frustration after a minor setback. The difference lies not in what happens, but in the lens through which they interpret events.

This lens is shaped by our automatic thoughts—rapid, habitual interpretations that occur before we consciously register them. When these automatic thoughts are distorted or irrational, they can negatively influence how we perceive ourselves, others, and the world. These distorted patterns are known as cognitive distortions.

Cognitive distortions are extremely common. They develop over time, often outside our awareness, and can significantly contribute to stress, anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation, relationship problems, and poor decision-making. The good news is that these thinking patterns can be identified, challenged, and changed.

This information sheet explains the most common cognitive distortions, how they affect us, and what can be done to address them.

---

### Changing Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions can be reshaped through psychological therapy—particularly Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which provides tools to:

- Identify automatic thoughts
- Examine the evidence for and against them
- Challenge unhelpful assumptions
- Replace distorted thinking with more balanced alternatives

This process, known as cognitive restructuring, allows people to respond to challenges with clarity rather than habit. Over time, modifying these thinking patterns can reduce emotional distress, improve coping, strengthen relationships, and support long-term psychological resilience.

If cognitive distortions are contributing to anxiety, depression, or distress in your life, working with a Counselling Psychologist can help you develop healthier, more empowering ways of thinking.

---

## Common Cognitive Distortions

Below is a comprehensive list of cognitive distortions frequently seen in clinical practice. Recognising these patterns is the first step toward change.

---

### MENTAL FILTERING

#### **Minimising or Discounting Positives:**

Focusing only on negative details while dismissing positive aspects of an event or experience.

Example: "Yes, I got a pay rise, but it wasn't much. I'm still useless."

**Magnifying:** Exaggerating the importance or severity of a situation ("making a mountain out of a molehill").

**Catastrophising:** Expecting the worst possible outcome without evidence.

Example: Failing one exam and assuming you will fail the entire degree.

#### **Dichotomous (BLACK-AND-WHITE)**

**Thinking:** Seeing things in extreme categories: good/bad, success/failure, right/wrong. This pattern ignores nuance and the broad range of possibilities between the two extremes.

**Overgeneralisation:** Drawing sweeping conclusions from a single event. Common indicators include words such as "always," "never," "every," "all."

Example: "I didn't get the job. I never succeed at anything."

**Labelling:** Assigning global labels to yourself or others based on one experience. Instead of saying, "I made a mistake," someone might conclude, "I'm a failure."

---

## ATTRIBUTION ERRORS

#### **Personalisation (Internal Control Fallacy):**

Assuming responsibility for events that are not actually within your control.

Example: Believing someone else's bad mood is your fault.

#### **Blaming (External Control Fallacy):**

Attributing all problems to others or external circumstances and avoiding personal responsibility.

**Self-Serving Bias:** Claiming personal credit for positive events while blaming outside factors for failures. This prevents genuine self-reflection and learning.

---

## ERRORS OF ASSUMPTION

**Mindreading:** Assuming you know what another person thinks or feels without having evidence.

Example: "She didn't reply to my message—she must be angry."

**Fortune Telling:** Predicting negative outcomes as if they are certain.

Example: "We won't find parking. It's pointless to try."

**Emotional Reasoning:** Believing that emotions equal facts.

Example one: "I feel unsafe, so I must be in danger."

Example two: "I feel dirty, so I must be contaminated," even after washing.

This can occur in anxiety disorders, trauma responses, and OCD-related thinking.

**Always Needing to Be ‘Right’:** Treating personal opinions as absolute truth and disregarding others’ perspectives. This pattern creates conflict and weakens relationships.

#### **Heaven’s Reward’ Fallacy**

Believing that personal sacrifice will automatically be rewarded, and feeling resentful when reality does not match expectations.

#### **The Fallacy of Change (Egocentricity):**

Expecting others to change to meet your needs or make you feel better.

Example: “If my partner changes their habits, then I will finally be happy.”

**The Fallacy of Fairness:** Believing the world should operate according to your personal sense of fairness.

When life does not cooperate—because it often doesn’t—resentment and frustration increase.

**‘Should’ Statements:** Rigid expectations of yourself or others using “should,” “ought,” or “must.”

These thoughts often generate guilt, shame, anger, or disappointment.

Examples:

“I should always be productive.”

“He should have called me earlier.”

“I must lose weight to be attractive.”

We can influence ourselves, but we cannot control others. “Should” statements reduce flexibility and increase emotional distress.

## **USING THIS INFORMATION IN THERAPY**

Understanding cognitive distortions is not about blaming yourself—it is about recognising patterns that developed over time and no longer serve you.

Therapy can help you:

- Identify your most common distortions
- Understand how these patterns developed
- Learn practical strategies to challenge them
- Replace them with more balanced thinking
- Improve emotional regulation
- Strengthen relationships
- Make more grounded decisions
- Build long-term psychological resilience

Changing thinking patterns is a skill, and like any skill, it improves with practice.

---

## **REFERENCES**

1. Beck, A. T. (1976). *Cognitive Therapies and Emotional Disorders*. New York: New American Library.
2. Beck, A. T. (1972). *Depression: Causes and Treatment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
3. Tagg, J. (1996). *Cognitive Distortions*. Retrieved from <http://daphne.palomar.edu/jtagg/cds.htm> #cogdis