



# Thought Warp

We're all capable of misreading a situation, or someone else's intentions or state of mind. Sometimes, it isn't much of a big deal, and you can laugh it off. But sometimes, it can wear away at trust in your own judgment.

Quite often, the causes of misreading is down to thinking patterns that have become habitual. And often, these are types of subconscious self-harm. In his book *Feeling Good*, psychiatrist and behavioural scientist David Burns defines ten 'cognitive distortions' that we are all susceptible to; ways of skewing or warping our view of things. You'll probably recognise at least some of them. Here they are:

1. ALL OR NOTHING THINKING

Seeing things in absolutes. For example, making one mistake in an exam and deciding you must have failed the whole thing.

2. OVERGENERALIZATION

Seeing a one-off negative event as a never-ending pattern of doom. For example, falling over and saying, "I'm ALWAYS falling over."

3. THE MENTAL FILTER

Dwelling on the one small negative amongst the hundred positives. We humans have evolved with negative bias so we can spot and tackle any incoming problem; but we really can overdo it, so it's good to pay attention, and to remember to relish the hundred good things too.

4. DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

Rejecting positive experiences as if they don't count. For example, "Yeah, I won, but that was a fluke." Or, "Yeah, I did work hard, but most of it was luck."

## 5. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

There are two ways of doing this.

### 5a. MIND READING

For example, deciding someone has a total downer on you, not seeing that those signals could be to do with something else, and probably are.

### 5b FORTUNE TELLING

Predicting that everything's going to go wrong and acting as if it's an inevitable fact.

### 6a. MAGNIFYING STUFF, OR CATASTROPHIZING

Exaggerating things, like that one mistake you made, or someone else's success as far greater than yours.

### 6b. MINIMISING STUFF

Downplaying certain things, like your own qualities, or someone else's faults.

## 7. EMOTIONAL RATIONALISING

Assuming that your feelings reflect how things really are. For example, "I'm feeling awful, therefore everything really is awful."

## 8. SHOULD STATEMENTS

Trying to motivate yourself by whacking yourself with 'shoulds' and 'shouldn'ts', musts and oughts, as though that's the only way you're going to do anything. This only creates shame and guilt. And directing shoulds and shouldn'ts towards other people creates frustration and resentment.

## 9. LABELLING AND MISLABELLING

... usually using highly charged language. For example, instead of saying, "I made a mistake," saying "I'm a loser." Or, instead of, "he really screwed up there and it hurt me," saying, "he's a total bastard."

## 10. PERSONALIZATION

Seeing yourself as responsible for some negative external event that you couldn't possibly have been responsible for. There's a lot of ego involved in that. Not everything bad happens because of you - and that's a good thing, right?

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## FURTHER EXAMPLES OF FILTERS TO WATCH OUT FOR:

### ROSE-TINTED SPECTACLES

Painting the past as though it was perfect, when it wasn't; usually arising from a wish that something in the present was better.

### POSITIVE SPIN

The politician's favourite: depicting things as 'really great' while knowing they really aren't.

### POLLYANNA-ISM

Blind optimism and insistent positivity. Ignoring all negatives can be dangerous, and indeed toxic. See also the 'cure your own cancer' type of toxic positivity, thinly masking cruel judgment and fear.

### PREJUDICE

Instant negative assumptions about and an attitude towards particular people, based purely on race, colour, nationality, background, education, gender, faith, beliefs, or appearance.

If you catch yourself out in a thought warp, it's great practice to stop just for a moment and check: would you say such things of a dear friend?

Be a good friend to yourself, as well as to others.