



## Cognitive distortions – when your brain lies to you

For the last couple of weeks as part of the Mental Health Notes, we have looked at common types of cognitive distortions – ‘Black and White Thinking’, ‘Mental Filter’, ‘Jumping to Conclusions’ and ‘Overgeneralising’. These unhelpful thinking patterns impact on how we think, feel and act. Today we will consider the different types of cognitive distortions and how they can overlap.

The difficulty with these cognitive distortions is that they don’t come in neatly packaged individual parcels. Often there are elements of a number of unhelpful thoughts that swirl around in our brains making it hard to identify a specific type of unhelpful thought.

Take the example of Mary who has just completed a job interview. Her friend asked her how it went:

*‘The interview went awful, as they always do (**Black and White Thinking & Overgeneralising**). I got stuck on one question, so they must think that I am stupid (**Mental Filter & Jumping to Conclusions**)’.*

This example illustrates that multiple types of unhelpful thinking can occur simultaneously.

When we are distressed or under pressure we are more likely to engage in unhelpful thinking. While unhelpful thinking patterns are very common, distorted thinking will vary from person to person. Events that may be terrifying for one person, such as public speaking, may be exciting for someone else.

Developing a mind-set where we can check whether our thoughts are reasonable or not is a helpful goal. So we can challenge our unhelpful thinking by asking ourselves questions such as: *Can I see any positives or just negatives? Is there any evidence for what I think? Would I say the same thing to a friend that I am saying to myself? Does this always happen or just sometimes?* Cognitive distortions can be hard to spot as they hijack the brain’s processing power, leaving a reduced capacity to notice them. Learning to recognise our cognitive distortions when we are not under pressure makes it easier to notice them when we are in stressful situations.

The current situation provides a rich environment for distorted thinking. The first task is to **notice** our unhelpful thinking. Secondly, we need to learn to **challenge** our unhelpful thoughts and move to more balanced thinking.

Further information on cognitive distortions may be found at:

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/UnhelpfulThinkingHabitsWithAlternatives.pdf>