The Most Common Cognitive Distortions

1. Filtering - A person engaging in filter (or "mental filtering) takes the negative details

and magnify those details while filtering out all the positive aspects of a situation. For instance, a person may pick out a single, unpleasant detail and dwell on it exclusively so that their vision of reality becomes darkened or distorted. When a cognitive filter is applied, the person sees only the negative and ignores anything positive.

2. Polarized Thinking (or "Black and White" Thinking) - In polarized thinking,

things are either "black-or-white" — all or nothing. We have to be perfect or we're a complete and abject failure — there is no middle ground. A person with polarized thinking places people or situations in "either/or" categories, with no shades of gray or allowing for the complexity of most people and most situations. A person with black-and-white thinking sees things only in extremes.

3. Overgeneralization - In this cognitive distortion, a person comes to a general

conclusion based on a single incident or a single piece of evidence. If something bad happens just once, they expect it to happen over and over again. A person may see a single, unpleasant event as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat. For instance, if a student gets a poor grade on one paper in one semester, they conclude they are a horrible student and should quit school.

4. Jumping to Conclusions - Without individuals saying so, a person who jumps to

conclusions assumes what another person is feeling and thinking — and exactly why they act the way they do, a.k.a **mind reading**. Jumping to conclusions can also manifest itself as **fortune-telling,** where a person believes their entire future is pre-ordained (whether it be in school, work, or romantic relationships). For example, a person may conclude that someone is holding a grudge against them, but doesn't actually bother to find out if they are correct. Another example involving fortune-telling is when a person

may anticipate that things will turn out badly in their next relationship, and will feel convinced that their prediction is already an established fact, so why bother dating.

5. Catastrophizing - When a person engages in catastrophizing, they expect disaster to

strike, no matter what. This is also referred to as *magnifying*, and can also come out in its opposite behavior, **minimizing**. In this distortion, a person hears about a problem and uses *what if* questions (e.g., "What if tragedy strikes?" "What if it happens to me?") to imagine the absolute worst occurring. For example, a person might exaggerate the importance of insignificant events (such as their mistake, or someone

else's achievement). Or they may inappropriately shrink the magnitude of significant events until they appear tiny (for example, a person's own desirable qualities or someone else's imperfections).

6. Personalization- Personalization is a distortion where a person believes that

everything others do or say is some kind of direct, personal reaction to them. They literally take virtually everything personally, even when something is not meant in that way. A person who experiences this kind of thinking will also compare themselves to others, trying to determine who is smarter, better looking, etc. A person engaging in personalization may also see themselves as the cause of some unhealthy external event that they were not responsible for. For

example, "We were late to the dinner party and *caused* everyone to have a terrible time. If I had only pushed my husband to leave on time, this wouldn't have happened."

7. Control Fallacies - This distortion involves two different but related beliefs about

being in complete control of every situation in a person's life. In the first, if we feel *externally controlled*, we see ourselves as helpless a victim of fate. For example, "I can't help it if the quality of the work is poor, my boss demanded I work overtime on it." The fallacy of *internal control* has us assuming responsibility for the pain and happiness of everyone around us. For example, "Why aren't you happy? Is it because of something I did?"

8. Fallacy of Fairness - In the fallacy of fairness, a person feels resentful because they

think that they know what is fair, but other people won't agree with them. As our parents tell us when we're growing up and something doesn't go our way, "Life isn't always fair." People who go through life applying a measuring ruler against every situation judging its "fairness" will often feel resentful, angry, and even hopelessness because of it. Because life isn't fair — things will not always work out in a person's favor, even when one believes they *should*.

9. Blaming - When a person engages in blaming, they hold other people responsible for

their emotional pain. They may also take the opposite track and instead blame themselves for every problem — even those clearly outside their own control. For example, "Stop making me feel bad about myself!" Nobody can "make" us feel any particular way — only we have control over our own emotions and emotional reactions.

10. Shoulds - Should statements ("I should pick up after myself more…") appear as a list

of ironclad rules about how every person should behave. People who break the rules make a person following these should statements angry. They also feel guilty when they violate their own rules. A person may often believe they are trying to motivate themselves with shoulds and shouldn'ts, as if they have to be punished before they can do anything. For example, "I really should exercise. I shouldn't be so lazy." *Musts* and *oughts* are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When a person directs *should statements* toward others, they often feel anger, frustration and resentment.

11. Emotional Reasoning - The distortion of emotional reasoning can be summed up

by the statement, "If I feel that way, it must be true." Whatever a person is feeling is believed to be true automatically and unconditionally. If a person feels stupid and boring, then they must be stupid and boring. Emotions are extremely strong in people, and can overrule our rational thoughts and reasoning. Emotional reasoning is when a person's

emotions takes over our thinking entirely, blotting out all rationality and logic. The person who engages in emotional reasoning assumes that their unhealthy emotions reflect the way things really are — "I feel it, therefore it must be true."

12. Fallacy of Change - In the fallacy of change, a person expects that other people

 will change to suit them if they just pressure or cajole them enough. A person needs to change people because their hopes for success and happiness seem to depend entirely on them. This distortion is often found in thinking around relationships. For example, a girlfriend who tries to get her boyfriend to improve his appearance and manners, in the belief that this boyfriend is perfect in every other way and will make them happy if they only changed these few minor things.

13. Global Labeling - In global labeling (also referred to as **mislabeling)**, a person

 generalizes one or two qualities into a negative global judgment about themselves or another person. This is an extreme form of overgeneralizing. Instead of describing an error in the context of a specific situation, a person will attach an unhealthy universal label to themselves or others. For example, they may say, "I'm a loser" in a situation where they failed at a specific task. When someone else's behavior rubs a person the wrong way — without bothering to understand any context around why — they may attach an unhealthy label to him, such as "He's a real jerk." Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded. For example, instead of saying someone drops her children off at daycare every day, a person who is mislabeling might say that "She abandons her children to strangers."

14. Heaven's Reward Fallacy - The final cognitive distortion is the false belief that a

 person's sacrifice and self-denial will eventually pay off, as if some global force is keeping score ("Karma" concept is often used here). This is a riff on the fallacy of fairness, because in a fair world, the people who work the hardest will get the largest reward. A person who sacrifices and works hard but doesn't experience the expected payoff will usually feel bitter when the reward doesn't come.