Cognitive Distortions Worksheet

Part 1. Common cognitive distortions

Automatic thoughts often follow common patterns, called cognitive distortions. A single thought may show two or three patterns at once, and some books give the patterns other names.

Pattern	What it looks like	An example
All-or-nothing thinking	I see only two options, such as perfect or worthless, and nothing between.	"I skipped one day of my walking plan, so the plan has failed."
Catastrophizing (fortune-telling)	I predict the worst and treat it as certain.	"The landlord wants to talk, so I'm going to be evicted."
Disqualifying or discounting the positive	I wave away good things I did, or good things that happened to me, as flukes or favors.	"She only praised my report because she felt sorry for me."
Emotional reasoning	I let the strength of a feeling settle what is true and give the facts less weight.	"I feel nervous about the drive, so the roads must be dangerous today."
Labeling	I sum up myself or someone else with one harsh word, based on one action.	"I forgot her birthday. I'm a horrible friend."
Magnification and minimization	I make the bad parts bigger than they are and the good parts smaller.	"Mixing up one name at the party was a disaster. The good talks I had mean nothing."
Mental filter (selective abstraction)	I fix on one thing that went wrong and lose sight of everything else that happened.	"One person yawned during my talk, so the talk went badly."
Mind reading	I treat my guess about what someone thinks, often something unkind about me, as fact without asking.	"My neighbor didn't wave. She must be annoyed with me."
Overgeneralization	I turn one event into a rule about everything or always.	"I got lost driving to the clinic. I never find my way anywhere."
Personalization	I read someone's mood or action as a sign about me and overlook other reasons.	"My coworker was quiet at lunch. I must have upset her."
"Should" and "must" statements	I live by strict rules for myself or others and judge harshly when one is broken.	"I should be able to handle all of this without help."
Tunnel vision	The bad side of a person or situation fills my whole view.	"There's nothing good about living in this town."

© 2026 Sentio University. Free to copy and adapt for clinical use. Not for resale.

Part 2. Catching distortions in my thoughts

When my mood drops or I catch myself doing something unhelpful, I write down what went through my mind and look for the patterns in Part 1.

Item	Entry
Name	
Date I started	

Thought 1

When and where	
The thought, in my own words	
How much I believed it (0 to 10)	
Patterns I can name in it	
A fairer way to put it	
How much I believe it now (0 to 10)	

Thought 2

When and where	
The thought, in my own words	
How much I believed it (0 to 10)	
Patterns I can name in it	
A fairer way to put it	
How much I believe it now (0 to 10)	

© 2026 Sentio University. Free to copy and adapt for clinical use. Not for resale.

Part 2. Catching distortions in my thoughts, continued

Thought 3

When and where	
The thought, in my own words	
How much I believed it (0 to 10)	
Patterns I can name in it	
A fairer way to put it	
How much I believe it now (0 to 10)	

Thought 4

When and where	
The thought, in my own words	
How much I believed it (0 to 10)	
Patterns I can name in it	
A fairer way to put it	
How much I believe it now (0 to 10)	

Other thoughts I noticed this week

Include: thoughts I caught but did not have time to write up, and the patterns I saw in them.

© 2026 Sentio University. Free to copy and adapt for clinical use. Not for resale.

Part 3. What I noticed

My most frequent patterns

Include: the patterns I marked most often and the words that signal them, such as “always,” “never” or “should.”

When they tend to show up

Include: the times, places, people or moods that often come with these patterns.

What helps me step back from these thoughts

Include: reminders, questions or steps that help me see a thought as one possible view.

What I want to talk about at my next session

Include: thoughts that were hard to label, questions and anything I want help with.

© 2026 Sentio University. Free to copy and adapt for clinical use. Not for resale.

Clinician guide: teaching cognitive distortions

- **When it fits.** Use the list once the client can catch automatic thoughts. J. S. Beck (2021) sees labeling distortions as a helpful option for many clients. Confirm that labeling is useful for the client, that the client sees the reason for it and that the list feels manageable.
- **Start with the client's own thoughts.** Keep notes on the distortions that recur in what the client says. The first time one turns up in session, give it its name and check whether the label rings true, then mark a few patterns on the list for the client to watch for between sessions (J. S. Beck, 2021).
- **Explain overlap and names.** The patterns overlap, and some thoughts fit more than one of them (J. S. Beck, 2021). The list follows the names in J. S. Beck (2021). Burns (1980/1999) and Persons et al. (2001) use some other names, such as jumping to conclusions and focus on the negative.
- **Review the list before assigning it.** Read through the list with the client and complete the first entry together, so the client has done one in session before trying it at home (J. S. Beck, 2021). If a client becomes upset and takes the errors as a sign of a serious problem, explain that everyone has distorted thoughts when their mood is low (Persons et al., 2001).
- **Move from labels to responses.** Naming a pattern is a first step toward a more balanced response (Persons et al., 2001). When a thought stays believable after labeling, work through it with a thought record. Ask about thoughts of suicide as part of your usual assessment, and follow your setting's crisis protocol whenever a situation involves risk.

The list of patterns follows the thinking errors in J. S. Beck (2021), with other names from A. T. Beck (1976), Burns (1980/1999) and Persons et al. (2001). The definitions, examples, layout and wording are original.

© 2026 Sentio University. Free to copy and adapt for clinical use. Not for resale.

Completed example: Omar (a fictional client)

Omar, 29, is a dispatcher for a delivery company in outpatient CBT for depression and anxiety. His therapist, T.A., went over the list with him at his fourth session, on December 3, 2026, and Omar logged three thoughts over the next week. Omar, his therapist and every detail of the case are invented.

Part 2. Catching distortions in my thoughts

Item	Entry
Name	Omar
Date I started	December 3, 2026

Thought 1

When and where	Friday night at home, after I burned the dinner I was cooking for my sister.
The thought, in my own words	“I always mess everything up.”
How much I believed it (0 to 10)	8
Patterns I can name in it	Overgeneralization and all-or-nothing thinking.
A fairer way to put it	I burned one dinner. Most of the meals I cook turn out fine.
How much I believe it now (0 to 10)	3

Thought 2

When and where	Sunday evening at home, looking at my bank app. I spent $60 more than I planned this week.
The thought, in my own words	“I’ll never get my money together. I’m a failure.”
How much I believed it (0 to 10)	8
Patterns I can name in it	Catastrophizing, overgeneralization and labeling.
A fairer way to put it	I went over by $60 this week. I can plan next week’s spending on Monday.
How much I believe it now (0 to 10)	4

© 2026 Sentio University. Free to copy and adapt for clinical use. Not for resale.

Part 2. Catching distortions in my thoughts, continued

Thought 3

When and where	Tuesday night. A friend from college hadn't answered my text about dinner for a day.
The thought, in my own words	"He thinks I'm annoying and doesn't want to see me."
How much I believed it (0 to 10)	7
Patterns I can name in it	Mind reading.
A fairer way to put it	I don't know what he's thinking. He's slow to answer when he travels for work.
How much I believe it now (0 to 10)	5

Part 3. What I noticed

My most frequent patterns

Overgeneralization. I say "always" and "never" a lot.

When they tend to show up

When I make a small mistake, and on Sunday nights when I'm alone.

What helps me step back from these thoughts

Catching the words "always" and "never" and asking whether that's true every time.

What I want to talk about at my next session

The thought about my friend. It still bothers me, and I want help with what to do if he doesn't answer.

T.A. and Omar read the log together at his next session. Omar noticed that "always" and "never" came up in two of his three thoughts, and he said that naming the pattern helped him see each thought as one way of looking at things. His belief in the thought about his friend had dropped from 7 to 5, less than the other two, so they worked through it on a thought record and planned a short message to send him.

© 2026 Sentio University. Free to copy and adapt for clinical use. Not for resale.

References and further reading

Books for clinicians

Beck, A. T. (1976). *Cognitive therapy and the emotional disorders*. International Universities Press. ISBN 0-8236-0990-1.

Beck, A. T., Rush, A. J., Shaw, B. F., & Emery, G. (1979). *Cognitive therapy of depression*. Guilford Press. ISBN 978-0-89862-919-4.

Beck, J. S. (2021). *Cognitive behavior therapy: Basics and beyond* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press. ISBN 978-1-4625-4419-6.

Persons, J. B., Davidson, J., & Tompkins, M. A. (2001). Using the thought record. In *Essential components of cognitive-behavior therapy for depression* (pp. 129–169). American Psychological Association. ISBN 978-1-55798-697-9.

Books for clients

Burns, D. D. (1999). *Feeling good: The new mood therapy* (Rev. ed.). Quill. ISBN 978-0-380-73176-3. (Original work published 1980)

© 2026 Sentio University. Free to copy and adapt for clinical use. Not for resale.