

Change your mind... Change your life!

Everyone has irrational and negative thoughts once in a while. But what happens when they become frequent and intense?



There are times when we see things as more negative than they really are. It doesn't matter what the evidence or experience tells us — once we put on that negative filter, it can be difficult to perceive something any other way. This is called a cognitive distortion.

When negative or irrational thinking continues, it could affect how you see yourself, others, and the world in general.

You might start operating under false assumptions. These assumptions may affect your mood and behaviours, and in turn, lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression.

But fixing cognitive distortions is possible — it just first requires you to identify your negative thoughts for what they are. Once you do, you may learn that it's typically not the situation that upsets you, but rather the thoughts or opinions about it. And you can change your thoughts and opinions.

How do you know if you're using cognitive distortions?

Well, you definitely are! We all do at some point. Almost all negative thinking is linked to these distortions. The key to stopping negative thinking is identifying those distortions you use the most, and those that may be affecting your mood the most.

Identifying them may be challenging at first because they often feel like logical, accurate thoughts. They make sense to you at some level, so you believe them. How do you stop negative thoughts? By fixing cognitive distortions.



9 TIPS

to Change Negative Thinking:

- 1 Read yourself
- 2 Identify the type of distortion
- 3 Change roles
- 4 Examine the evidence
- 5 Sum of its parts
- 6 Skip generalisations
- 7 Avoid speculations
- 8 No more “shoulds”
- 9 Cost-benefit analysis

Read yourself by checking in

1

If you experience anxiety throughout the day without a clear trigger or reason, you may be using cognitive distortions in the moment. If you notice symptoms or signs of anxiety, turn your attention to your thoughts. Consider asking yourself if they might be causing how you feel. In time, you can start linking which thoughts cause you to experience anxiety or other mood symptoms. These are the thoughts we want to work on first.

2

Identify your most-used distorted thoughts

It may be a good idea to see which type of negative thought you often fall into. Metacognition is key here. This means thinking about what you're thinking about. Creating a daily mood and thought log could help you with this.

3

Changing roles

Changing roles in your head may help you identify different aspects of the same situation that you could be overlooking. It can help you stop negative thoughts and replace them with more realistic and optimistic ones.

4

Examine the evidence

Negative thought patterns aren't typically based on facts. Similar to changing roles, examining the evidence is looking for cues in the situation that contradict your negative thoughts. If you notice some of your thoughts are about criticizing or belittling yourself, for example, turn to the evidence. List all the ways you're productive, successful, efficient, loving, or supportive.

5

Sum of its parts

As you identify these negative thought patterns, you'll notice that they often come with labels. "You're a failure," "They're losers," or "I'm so boring" are examples. These labels don't apply to the person as a whole. Someone may lose a job, not pass a test, or feel like skipping a party at times. That doesn't mean this is always the case.

6

Avoid the urge to generalise

Cognitive distortions like overgeneralisation or black-or-white thinking may lead you to take one negative incident and apply it to everything and everyone. For example, saying something that's not accurate doesn't mean everything you say is inaccurate. If you learn to identify the difference, you can reframe any situation in your mind. The "opposite threes" technique may help.

Opposite threes - Every time you find yourself generalising, think of three opposites to the situation. For example, when you think "I never do anything right," consider turning your attention to mentally identify three scenarios where you've been accurate, efficient, or successful.



Skip speculation

We're almost certain you can't read minds. But, in many circumstances, you may act or think like you do. Because of this, it can be a good idea to do a "reality check" before you jump to conclusions. This can start by you asking others about the matter. When you do this, it's highly probable you'll find evidence to the contrary of your cognitive distortion. Of course, a critical aspect of this exercise is to believe what people tell you.



Replace "shoulds"

A common cognitive distortion that leads to negative thinking is "shoulds" — "I should go to the gym every day," or "They should talk more often during work meetings." These "shoulds" act as ironclad rules that may automatically set you and others up for failure. Consider replacing "I should" thoughts with, "I'd like to..." or "It'd be nice if..." This may alter your perspective and take off the pressure, improving your mood and outlook.



Cost-benefit analysis

A cost-benefit analysis typically refers to estimating the benefits of a decision versus the costs associated with it. In this instance, you'd take the thoughts you've identified, and think about what pros and cons they offer you. Ask yourself: "How does this thought help me and how does it hurt me?"

If you find that some of these thoughts do you more harm, it might become easier for you to combat them. You could also find out that you use some of these thinking patterns because they represent some benefit to you.

You can do it!

It's not always easy to shake negative thoughts, but learning to **reframe our thinking and be present to enjoy what's around us** are great skills to acquire as we strive for the best mental health.

For more information or assistance, you are welcome to contact Platinum Health's Mental Health Services (014 590 1700 or 080 000 6942).

EAP Counsellors (010 133 0525) are also available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week to offer counselling and support.

