

Untwisting Cognitive Distortions

1. **Identify, identify, identify.** *In grief therapy, it's called overcoming denial. In relapse-prevention, it's called admitting or acknowledging there's a problem. Identification is always necessary before change can occur. Identifying simply that there IS an issue is step one; identifying WHAT the issue is, is step two. Ways to do this include...*
 - a. Journaling: Specifically about negative, maladaptive, irrational, and/or unrealistic thinking patterns, core beliefs, emotions, and even behaviors.
 - b. Tracking: Use a calendar or planner and write down when one of these maladaptive thoughts/feelings/behaviors occur. With time, patterns may emerge.
2. **Examine the evidence.** *Fight assumptions with actual evidence. You might be surprised to find that there's less evidence for the maladaptive assumption, and MORE evidence for a thinking pattern that is contrary to the maladaptive assumption. A good way to exercise this...*
 - a. Defining Terms: Let's say the assumption includes a label such as "I am a failure." What is the actual definition of failure anyways? It's likely that you don't meet the criteria. It's also likely that your personal definition would differ from others' definitions.
3. **The Double-Standard Method.** *Do you know the definition of a double-standard? It's some standard we apply to ourselves that we do not apply to others (or vice-versa). To test this out...*
 - a. Imagine Hypotheticals: In your mind, challenge yourself by imagining being asked to go up to a stranger (or someone you know!) and being asked to sincerely call them a "failure" (or "worthless," or "a terrible person," or whatever). Chances are you're going to have some moral/ethical obligation to that. So WHY do it to yourself??
 - b. Identify with the Negative: Sometimes siding with our enemy is the best method. We tend to label ourselves and apply a double-standard against ourselves because, naturally, we focus on negative (especially when it comes to our own behavior). Why? Because it's intended to help us improve. The problem comes when thinking about the negative becomes DE-activating, as opposed to activating (for ex., feeling terrible and losing motivation in life, as opposed to recognizing we did something wrong and resolving to change). So, it IS natural -- sometimes we just take it too far.
4. **The Experimental Technique.** *Simply put, test it out! Whether or not this works depends a lot on context, so make sure to take that in to account. Here's a couple of examples...*
 - a. The Survey Method: Actually another good technique for untwisting cognitive distortions, this involves asking peers -- taking a sample. Think of a particular cognitive distortion (again, labelling is a great example), and ask others if they agree, if they dispute this cognitive distortion. This also untwists double-standard thinking very well.

Untwisting Cognitive Distortions

- b. **Validity Testing:** This is great for potential self-fulfilling prophecies. Test the validity of your negative argument. For instance, upcoming social situation you're sure you'll fail at? Schedule a small "tester" social situation -- find a small gathering (at work is a great example) and test out interacting with others before the "big day." You can increase the potency of this by combining it with the Survey Method and asking your "test participants" afterward how they felt you did.
- 5. Thinking in Shades of Gray.** *Where does the line between "success" and "failure" exist in the A-F grading scale for you? Is it at 'C?' 'B?' Better yet, where does it exist on the 0-100% grading scale? These are trick questions: There is no line between "success" and "failure." Surely success and failure exist somewhere in this context (100% and 0%, for example), but they don't exist in ALL contexts, and they DEFINITELY don't exist right next to each other. There are shades of gray between. It's not so dichotomous. It's not all-or-nothing. And if you want to play devil's advocate even MORE: even IF there's success and failure and nothing else, always remember that, in the grand scheme of things, the best of life's successes come from failure to begin with.*
- 6. The Semantic Method.** *Let's get less black-and-white with our language, too. We use "should" and "shouldn't" A LOT. These statements set you up for feelings of failure and inadequacy. So don't use them! Take "I shouldn't have done that" and redress it in to "I would've preferred I not do that." The basic semantics (or rather, "meaning") remain the same, but the language is less...harsh.*
- 7. Re-Attribution.** *Have you ever really thought about all the factors that could've played a role in a particular outcome? There's a pretty good chance you had less of a hand in it than you thought. We get caught up answering the question "why?" sometimes that we hijack energy best-used in problem-solving. Sometimes "why?" doesn't have an answer. Sometimes "why?" has an answer that is useless. Or sometimes answering "why?" results in just two more "why?" questions (who didn't do this as a kid, anyways?).*
 - a. The ABCDE Model of Situational Analysis is the best example of utilizing this method, but that's for another time.
- 8. Cost-Benefit Analysis.** *Not quite a pro's-con's list, this is useful for any negative/maladaptive/irrational/unrealistic thought, feeling or behavior. Draw a table like you would for a pro-con list, but instead use the words "Costs" and "Benefits." Then use this list in analyzing one specific thought, feeling, or behavior. What is this costing us right now? Losing sleep is a great example of this: We might lose sleep even for recreational activities, but is the benefit of an additional hour of socialization, or catching one more episode of Game of Thrones worth the costs associated with losing an hour of sleep? Probably not (or, if you think it is, then you need to research the emotional and physical toll of even one lost hour of sleep takes).*