



# Cognitive Distortions for Creative Activists

In the Star Trek universe, Vulcans like Dr. Spock always think objectively and rationally. We're not Vulcans. Human beings have a tendency toward self-deception – a trait that was a valuable part of human evolution and helped us survive in tribes over centuries. Our thoughts and perceptions are filtered through our minds – and reality gets distorted in the process. This is easy to recognize in others, but much harder to see in ourselves. To help, psychologists have identified the 10 distortions below that affect human cognition.

In our work as creative activists, cognitive distortions can undermine our ambitions and alliances, causing bitterness and burn-out. Recognizing distorted thinking allows us see the difference between reality and our thoughts, making our work less stressful, our decisions more effective, and increase our chances of success.

## Your assignment

Is to review this list of distortions and connect them to examples from your work where they may apply. Pick as many distortions as you like and write down an example from your experience

- What was the distorted perception?
- Now be kinder to yourself: what was closer to reality?

Note:

- They could be distortions in your own thinking or among collaborators.
- Your example for one distortion may overlap with other distortions on the list – make note of this.

## ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING

You see things in black and white categories. Everything is seen as good or bad or a success or failure. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a failure. These types of thoughts are characterized by terms such as or 'every', 'always', or 'never'.

"Our protests never do anything."

"Every time we try, the authorities shut us down."

## OVERGENERALIZATION

You see a single negative event as a never ending pattern of defeat.

Thinking in an over-generalizing way means we will often see a single unpleasant incident or event as evidence of everything being awful and negative, and a sign that now everything will go wrong.

"We applied for funding for that once and were rejected. Our projects will never be supported."

## DISQUALIFYING THE POSITIVE

Disqualifying the positive is when we continually discount and dismiss the positive experiences we encounter, by deciding they are unimportant or 'don't count'. For example, a peer complements your work, and you decide they are just saying that to be polite.

## JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

Jumping to conclusions is when we make negative predictions or interpretations, even when there is no evidence to support them. It's often broken into two categories; *mind-reading* and *fortune-telling*.

*Mind-reading* is assuming the thoughts and intentions of others, without bothering to verify if it's true. For example, "this cop is confronting us because she disagrees with our politics." Or "that curator is only reaching out to co-opt our movement."

*Fortune-telling* is predicting things will turn out for the worst, and assuming it as fact. "If we keep moving forward, we're all going to be arrested and charged with felonies, I know it!"

# **MAGNIFICATION AND MINIMIZING (ALSO REFERRED TO AS “CATASTROPHIZATION”)**

Thinking in a magnifying or minimizing manner is when we exaggerate the importance of negative events and minimize or downplay the importance of positive events. The typical result of thinking catastrophically is that we are unable to see any other outcome other than the worse one, however unlikely this result may turn out to be.

You may exaggerate your own mistake, and minimize what you’ve achieved. Or exaggerate someone else’s accomplishments and minimize their imperfections and then compare yourself against this unrealistic “peer”.

## **MENTAL FILTER**

Mental filtering is when we focus on a single negative detail and focus on it *exclusively*, filtering out all the positive aspects. This could be a flaw in a piece that you believe ruins the entire project, or focusing on a single critical comment when an overwhelming majority loved the work. For example, obsessing on one grumpy face in your audience and not seeing all the others nodding and smiling.

## **EMOTIONAL REASONING**

Emotional reasoning is when we assume feelings reflect fact, regardless of the evidence. The idea here is “I feel it, therefore it must be true.” For example, Newt Gingrich recently dismissed that crime statistics were down because people “feel more threatened”.

## **SHOULD STATEMENTS**

Individuals thinking in “shoulds”, “oughts,” or “musts” have an ironclad view of how they and others “should” and “ought” to be. These rigid views or rules can generate feelings of anger, frustration, resentment, disappointment and guilt if not followed.

Example: You don’t like going to downtown galleries, but you feel you “should”, and that you “shouldn’t” be as dismissive of abstract sculpture, and that the galleries “ought to” have more politically aware work on the walls. You also feel that you “must” confront the gallerist about it.

## **LABELLING AND MISLABELLING**

Labeling is an extreme form of ‘all or nothing’ thinking and over-generalization. Rather than describing a specific behavior, an individual instead assigns a negative and highly emotive label to themselves or others that leaves no room for change.

Example: You make a mistake on a funding application that costs you the grant. So you decide “I’m a failure” or “I’m so stupid” rather than thinking “I made a mistake as I had a busy day when I was filling this out”.

Or, turning labels on others, one could say landlords, cops, institutions, or fill-in-the-blank “are our enemy”.

## PERSONALIZATION

A person engaging in personalization will automatically assume responsibility and blame for negative events that are not under their control. This is also called “the mother of guilt” because of the feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy it leads to.

Examples:

“I didn’t do enough to prevent the rise of Trump.”

“I didn’t go to the last meeting, which is when everyone decided on the project idea that was such a failure.”

---

2017 CC BY-NC-SA Center for Artistic Activism

sources:

- [Ten Cognitive Distortions - Common Thinking Errors in CBT](#)
- David D. Burns, “Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy,” Harper Collins