

CBT and Neurodivergence (Part 1) Basics of CBT

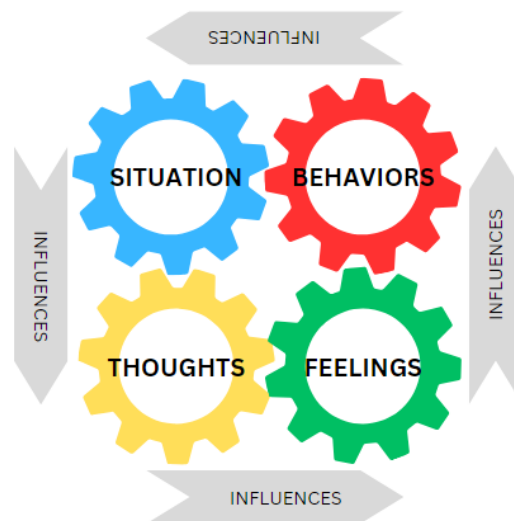
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Introduction

Human beings, neurodivergents included, are sentient beings who can not only sense what is around them but can make deep meaning and emotions out of information acquired from their senses. People make actions not only based on the results of senses from environmental stimuli but also based on their thoughts and feelings. Our feelings are not the result of our current situation but our thoughts that come from perceiving and interpreting our current situation.

How The Cognition Cycle Works:

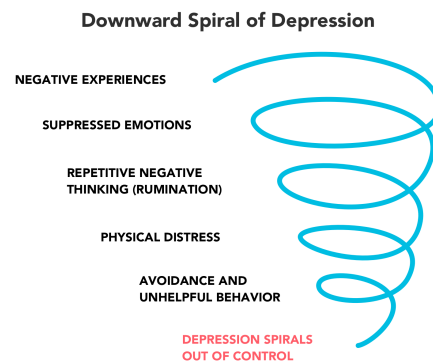


Here is a simple yet more accurate model that interprets how our brains work:

1. We have a current situation we are in
2. We have thoughts based on our current situation
3. We feel emotions based on our thoughts
4. We develop behaviors and act based on our feelings
5. The situation changes based on our behaviors and actions

Our capability of thought is however often mired in cognitive distortions- irrational and maladaptive nasty thinking patterns such as mental filters, biases, trends,

perceptions, and more. This can make us feel awful emotions which would lead us to develop maladaptive behaviors and actions that make our situations and environments worse. Cognitive distortions occur especially when people are experiencing depression, extreme stress, and other mental health afflictions. Because neurodivergent individuals are at higher risk for developing these mental health afflictions, along with other factors related to neurodivergence such as stigma and discrimination, they are at especially high risk of possessing these cognitive distortions.



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Classical behavioral science and therapy primarily focus on our behaviors, their development, and their consequences. However, this doesn't really take into account our thoughts and feelings and how they affect behaviors and decisions, so it's suboptimal for fixing behaviors arising from irrational thinking patterns. It would require cognitive psychology which in part deals with cognitions – the thoughts that we have based on perceiving our surroundings.

What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy teaches us to effectively monitor our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, how they influence each other, and how to find and replace negative ones with positive ones.

It finds and replaces them with more realistic, evidence-supported, and positive thoughts. Because thoughts influence feelings and behaviors, it will make us feel invigorated to take steps towards getting back in control. Although you can't suddenly change your current situation, you can change your attitude about the situation. This can be profoundly helpful, as thoughts drive feelings which drive actions. More realistic, positive, and productive thoughts can make you feel more happy, motivated, and in control, leading to actions that improve your situation. You can use the following graphic worksheet below as a guide to practice CBT.

Simple Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Worksheet

My Current Situation	What Are My Thoughts Based On This Situation	What Are My Feelings From My Thoughts	Actions I'll Take Based On These Feelings	How My Actions Will Change My Situation

We can't change this initially	We can and should focus on changing these first	Influenced by our thoughts	Influenced by our feelings	Consequences of actions

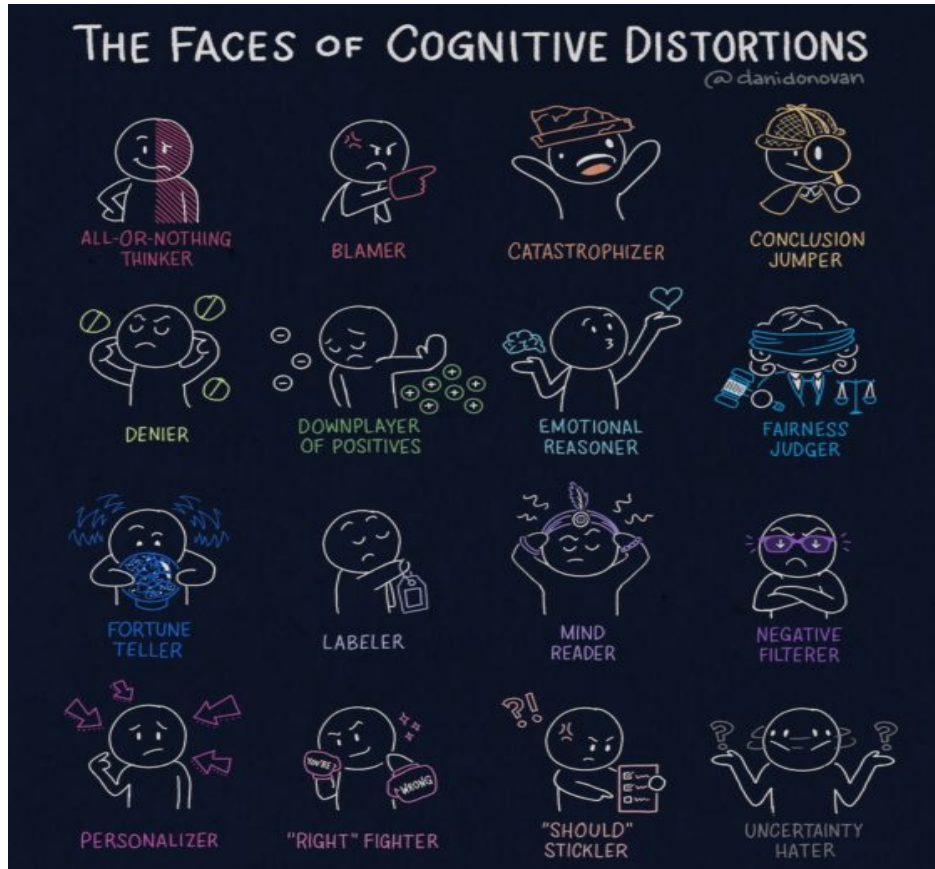
My Current Situation	What Are My Thoughts Based On This Situation	What Are My Feelings From My Thoughts	Actions I'll Take Based On These Feelings	How My Actions Will Change My Situation
Write a situation here you would like to practice CBT in the leftmost common.	Put down your current or initial unhealthy thinking patterns and thoughts based on the situation in the previous column.	List some emotions (both positive and negative) you feel based on these unhealthy thinking patterns and thoughts.	What actions (both positive and negative) will these emotions lead you to do?	How would these actions influence your situation? List down things (both positive and negative) that will happen if you take these actions.

	Try to correct your previously unhealthy thoughts or come up with some more positive and helpful thoughts and write them down here.	List some emotions (both positive and negative) you feel based on these healthier thinking patterns and thoughts.	What actions (both positive and negative) will these new emotions lead you to do?	How would these new actions influence your situation? List down things (both positive and negative) that will happen if you take these actions.
We can't change this initially	We can and should focus on changing these first	Influenced by our thoughts	Influenced by our feelings	Consequences of actions

Now it's time to identify some cognitive distortions and learn the right ways to counter them.

Examples Of Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions negatively warp your perception of reality, and in fact, it's difficult to identify them as your brain habitually believes its current perception is rational and factual. It can be hard for the brain to unlearn after long periods of training. Thankfully, CBT teaches us how to identify cognitive distortions. We will be going over some examples.

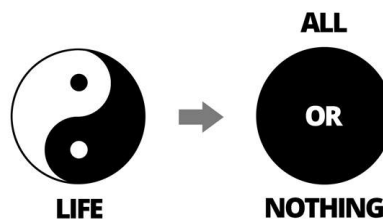


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1. Extreme Thinking

All Or Nothing Thinking: If something doesn't go perfectly it is a complete failure.

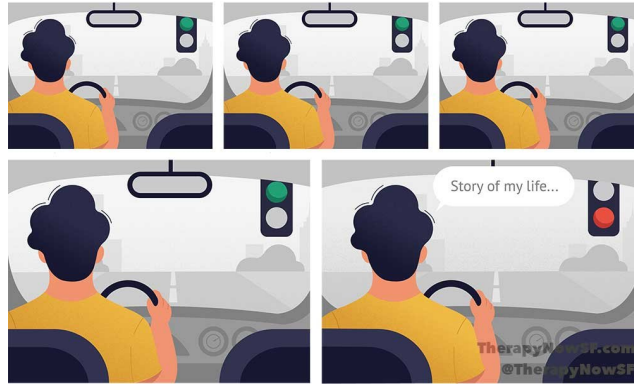
Even a minor screw-up spells total failure with this thinking. Another variant is if they can't do something perfectly, it would be pointless for them to try. Victims of this distortion easily claim defeat. This could make them quit tasks midway, preventing them from completing difficult yet rewarding endeavors. They would also avoid seeking out golden opportunities for self-improvement, accomplishments, and success.



<https://sova.pitt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/All-or-nothing-thinking.jpg>

Overgeneralization: Taking a few bad examples of something and using them to overgeneralize that something is completely awful. A person thinking like this could

believe that something negative that happens occasionally would always happen to them. This can lead to people overestimating the negativity of their situation, killing their optimism, passion, and willpower to continue trying.



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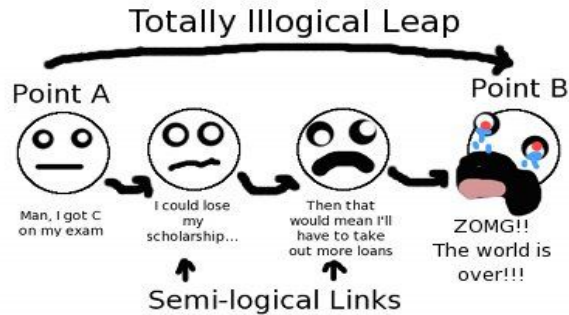
Black And White Thinking: Thinking a person or situation is completely something or something else, with no levels in between. In reality, there always will be in-betweens and nuances. This can result in unfounded and drastic view changes, with a single negative experience completely ruining one's views on something. One could describe aspects of themselves, others, or their experiences with extreme wording such as "always" or "never", or as completely negative. This can cause themselves and others to feel worse than they should, worsening interactions and relations with others and driving them down a spiral of negativity.



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2. Poor Predictions

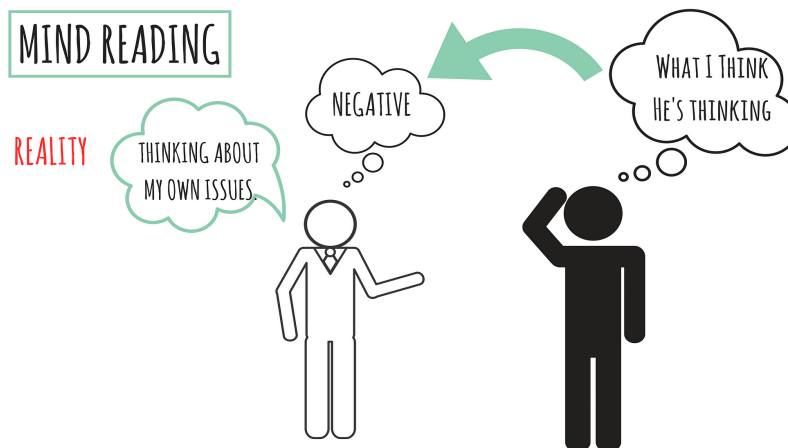
Catastrophizing: Assuming the worst possible cases have happened or are most likely. This is irrational if there's little to no supporting evidence or plenty of refuting evidence. Tricking your brain into believing a situation is exaggeratedly worse overwhelms you with negative emotions and may prevent you from taking helpful actions. The same goes for tricking your brain into thinking the worst is most likely to happen.



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Mind Reading: Assuming what and how other people know and think about you.

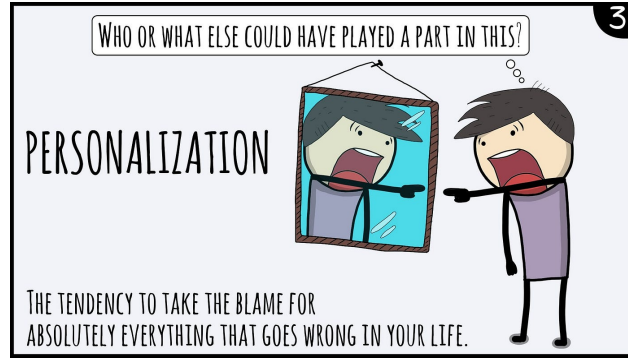
For example, you assume that people have negative impressions of you and are annoyed by your actions. In reality, people are probably feeling overall neutral if not positive about you. Mind reading can cause an individual to feel unnecessarily vindictive, anxious, or upset based on assumptions that lack reason.



You assume that you know what the other person is thinking.

KASSEY VILCHES

Personalization: Assuming everything that is happening around you, even things out of your control, is to a disproportionate degree caused by you. By doing this you are unfoundedly placing blame on yourself for the wrongdoings of others or factors outside your control, giving yourself extra stress, anxiety, and self-loathing. You may also think that the reason why others are acting negatively around or towards you is because of you; in reality, their day was likely tainted by another factor.



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3. Absolute Labeling

Labeling: Putting an absolute label on yourself or someone based on occasions.

These names/labels tend to be an inflated and inaccurate reflection of their qualities. A name is a powerful thing! If you label yourself as something negative like an “incompetent idiot” repeatedly, you’d believe you inherently and permanently possess these characteristics, creating a blanket of hopelessness blocking growth. The same happens to others when you label them.



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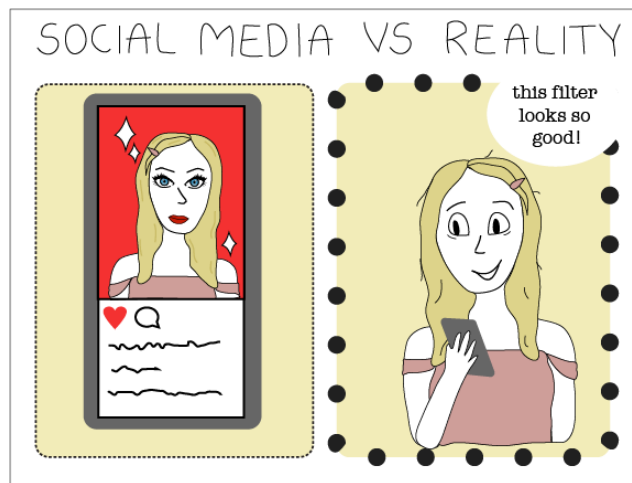
Flawed Filters

Mental Filtering: Focusing only on one side of a situation and filtering out all other sides. For example, focusing on the negatives while ignoring the positives. This will result in you undermining the positive actions and progress you have made and constantly dwelling on your failures and flaws. You could belittle your positive efforts as futile, which would make you overwork, overstress, or give up. You could undermine your strengths, making yourself feel devoid of positive traits. You could act this way towards other people around you, such as ignoring the positive things others have done and pestering them on their flaws, burning ties between you and them.



<https://www.manhattancbt.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/half-full-vs-half-empty-mental-filter.jpg>

Unreal-Idealistic Comparison: Excessively and unfairly comparing yourself to others. If you are in a fairly turbulent situation and everyone around you seems to be handling the same or similar situation fine, you might get upset and blame yourself for struggling. Most likely, people around you are also struggling. You might also compare your shortcomings to others' strengths while ignoring your strengths and others' shortcomings. This is the perfect recipe for an inferiority complex.



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Emotional Reasoning

Feelings = Reality: Thinking your feelings accurately reflect on your reality. If you experience a certain negative emotion, this cognitive distortion can trick you into thinking something is actually wrong. You might also feel hurt by others' innocent or even positive actions and accuse others of being hurtful when they weren't or weren't intentionally. By letting your negative and irrational emotions impact your thoughts, your thoughts will further amplify those emotions, creating a nasty feedback loop.

Root Causes For Cognitive Distortions

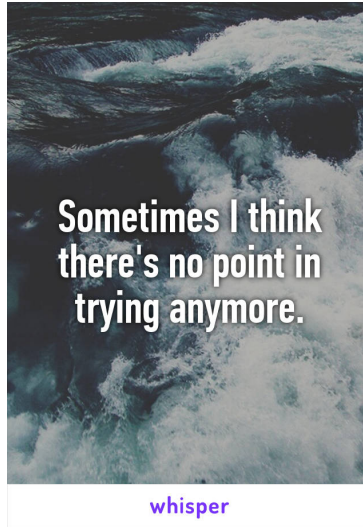
Like how all ways of thinking are developed, your brain might have evolved cognitive distortions for short-term benefits, such as protection against certain threats, coping mechanisms for harsh experiences, or fixing a past problem. However, in the long term, they instead contribute to mental health issues or even an unfulfilling and unsuccessful life. Here are a couple of potential reasons leading to the development of distortions.

Always Expecting The Worst: Some cognitive distortions are evolved to protect oneself from disappointment, shock, and anguish from experiencing a sudden overwhelming wave of adversity. Some people, would rather always expect the worst and not be surprised when misfortune hits them than have reasonably optimistic expectations and be unprepared and overwhelmed with sudden adversity. This stems from natural fear and vulnerability towards unexpected adversity or past prolonged streaks of negative experiences. These cognitive distortions seem to work temporarily by saving us from experiencing unexpected letdowns, but in the long run, you're starved of positive emotions, experiences, and endeavors of self-improvement.



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Avoiding Risk and Effort: A lot of rewarding and beneficial actions we pursue in life require a lot of efforts and could even be risky with failure yielding negative consequences. This could cause us to avoid them due to our fear of trying and failure, fear of futile efforts, fear of responsibility, and laziness. Past consecutive streaks of failures and wasted efforts can easily drive us to avoid seeking and pursuing potentially risky yet rewarding enterprises. Related cognitive distortions make golden excuses to not put hard work into actions which bring positive impact, exacerbating a downward spiral.



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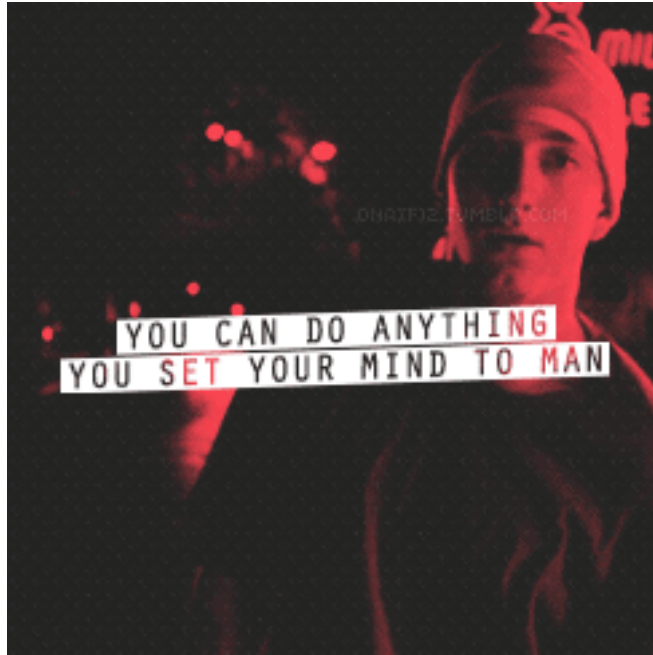
Comfort In Labeling: Labels could provide a good explanation, excuse, or acceptance for your incompetence in an area. It's fine to accept yourself as someone who possesses those weaknesses, but it's unacceptable to use labels to excuse yourself from putting in hard work to improve upon those weaknesses. Doing that would only make you feel permanently inferior, incapable, and like a failure.



<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/trust-me-im-failure-karen-heng>

Conclusion and Next Steps

We have covered the basics of cognitive distortions, their effects, and why we develop them. By knowing the possible causes and origins of our cognitive distortions, we can then create replacement thoughts that address those target causes. In the next article **CBT and Neurodivergence (Part 2) Applying CBT**, we'll cover some counters to cognitive distortions, how neurodivergent people can use CBT, as well as drawbacks and alternatives to CBT. Remember, regardless of your identity, you have the power to make yourself good at anything you dedicate effort, perseverance, and optimism to. Don't let your disabilities, shortcomings, and other disadvantages in life hold you back from achieving greatness.



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