MYT
MAXIMIZE YOUR TALENT

Practice Worksheet:
Cognitive Distortions and Thought Record

Below are some ways we think and interpret events that may tend to lead to anger, anxiety, fear, sadness, and/or conflicts in relationships. These are the main *cognitive distortions* articulated and refined by cognitive psychologists over the last five decades.

All or Nothing Thinking: Thinking of things in absolute terms, like "always", "every" or "never". Few aspects of human behavior are so absolute. We often see things in black and white categories. If our performance falls short of perfect, we see ourselves as a total failure, if expectations are met, total success. Everything in life is in between… oops, did I say everything?!

Overgeneralization: Taking one or a few cases and using them to make wide generalizations. For example, "I didn't get that account – I'm not good at this job"

Negative Mental Filter: Focusing exclusively negative or upsetting aspects of something while ignoring the rest. Examples: focusing on a tiny imperfection in a piece of beautiful clothing; much of a project is working well, but we dwell on what's not working well and that becomes the entire experience. What we focus on is a choice.

Disqualifying the Positive: Continually "shooting down" positive experiences for arbitrary, ad hoc reasons. We reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or other. We maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by our everyday experiences. "I did well on that account, but that one was easy." "Joe and Sue are nice but they have to be at work."

Mind Reading: Assuming we know what someone else is thinking or feeling without having actually checked it out. For example, during a boardroom presentation, "Mary just looked down, she must be bored."

Fortune telling: Predicting how things will unfold before they happen. We cannot even predict the weather a week from now, much less predict our career, family, or even what we will want a month, year or decade from now. "If this doesn't go well I'll lose my job", or "will be miserable."

Catastrophizing: Focusing on the worst possible outcome, however unlikely, or thinking that a situation is unbearable, impossible, or horrible when it is really just uncomfortable.

Emotional reasoning: Making decisions and arguments based on how we *feel* rather than objective reality or mistaking emotional intensity as valid reasoning.

Shoulds & Musts: Assuming we know what we or others "must" or "must not" do or what the world "should" be like rather than the situation with which we are actually faced. It also looks like having rigid rules that we think should always apply no matter the circumstances. "This MUST happen or ＿＿＿＿". When we apply "should" to ourselves, we often feel guilty, when we apply it to others we often feel frustration, anger, resentment.

Labeling: Explaining behaviors or events, merely by naming them. It's related to overgeneralization. Rather than describing the specific behavior, we assign a label to someone or ourselves that puts the person or experience in absolute and unalterable terms. Instead of describing our error, we attach a negative label to ourselves: "I'm a loser." When someone else's behavior rubs us the wrong way, we attach a negative label to him, "He's a damn louse." Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.

Personalization: Taking things personally and assuming you are the cause of something when that may not be the case. Often there are multiple causes but we seem to feel better if we can find something specific to blame as a scapegoat.

Automatic Thoughts and Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions are embedded within our everyday thinking. Chances are, if you feel emotionally charged or activated, cognitive distortions are very nearby. We identify a special category of thoughts called "automatic thoughts" in order to tease-out our hidden cognitive distortions. Automatic

thoughts come in the form of snap judgments about ourselves, others, and/or the world around us. They're the type of thoughts that are present before we know it. They pop into our minds and we act, or react, with them as our guides.

Examples of common types of automatic thoughts:
"He never understands me, I shouldn't even try to talk with him."
"She's really angry at me, I can just tell by the way she's standing."
"I'm a failure."
"I'll never be able to do this correctly."
"If I mess-up this presentation, I'll not going to get a promotion. I'll probably lose my job. Then I won't be able to pay my mortgage and I'll lose my house, too."

Thought Record Instructions

General Purpose of a Thought Record: The *Thought Record* is a tool for identifying the automatic thoughts that are associated with our emotions of irritation, anger, anxiety, stress, sadness, depression and others. Those automatic thoughts are typically unrealistic in predictable ways, called cognitive distortions.

The Thought Record thus both identifies the automatic thoughts, as well as facilitates our identifying these cognitive distortions associated with our automatic thoughts, both of which lead to the negative emotions and our suffering. The goal is to use evidence from our everyday life to change our less realistic thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes to make them more realistic. A typical consequence of that change in thinking is a reduction in the intensity, frequency, and duration of our irritation, anger, anxiety, stress, sadness, and depression.

Thought Record Structure: On the following page is the structure of a thought record, and a summary of the instructions for each of its sections. Below that is a blank thought record for you to photocopy and use for multiple emotional situations over the next several months.

The first section of the thought record identifies the situation that seemed to spark the emotion. In the second section, you pause and self-reflect on which emotions are present (e.g., anger, anxiety, etc.). There are likely several. This facilitates the Emotional Intelligence skill of becoming increasingly aware of your own emotions. You then rate each of the emotions on a scale from 1-100. This both helps to later be able to assess reductions in intensity but also to shift from All-or-Nothing thinking in terms of intensity of emotions.

In the next two sections, you list the automatic thoughts associated with each of the emotions you listed, and the cognitive distortions associated with those automatic thoughts. For example, if the automatic thought is, "I'll blow that presentation and it will lead to job loss," the cognitive distortions you would list next to that would be All-or-Nothing thinking (meaning you either blow it or not rather than shades of grey in between), Fortune Telling (assuming we know how the future presentation will go), and Catastrophizing (exaggerating potential consequences).

We then use the next two columns to look at the evidence for and against that automatic thought. This evidence needs to be behavioral, concrete examples from our own lives. In the next column we then integrate this evidence and use it to generate a more realistic Replacement Thought, and rate our confidence in its realism from 1-100. If the realism rating is less than 75-80, it is useful to go back to the evidence and tweak the replacement thoughts to make them more realistic. We complete the thought record by re-assessing the original emotions and their intensities as we consider the Replacement Thoughts. If we observe a decent reduction in intensity, for example, from anger intensity of 90 to a 70 or 60, that replacement thought becomes a useful mantra for similar future events
similar to the initial anger event. We then combine that replacement thought practice with deep breathing, to reduce escalations and shift from fight/flight responses.

Thought Record Example With Instructions

Situation	Emotion/ Rating	Automatic Thought	Cognitive Distortion	Evidence For	Evidence Against	Replacement Thought	Emotion/ Re-rating
Briefly describe a challenging situation in which you want to improve your performance.	Check in with yourself. What emotions are present as you contemplate this challenging situation? In parenthesis, rate the intensity of each emotion on a scale of 1 (minimum) to 100 (maximum)	What automatic thoughts are associated with this challenging situation? Identify the most potent one and work with it first. These can often be interconnected, but for the sake of utility, work on them one at a time.	What cognitive distortions are present in this automatic thought? (Refer to the list on the previous pages for assistance.)	What concrete evidence exists supporting this automatic thought? Resist the urge to be abstract. Abstractions can be very biased and hard to dispute. Be as concrete and specific as possible. When possible use specific time frames, numbers of incidences, and so on. In short, try to put these in measurable terms.	What concrete evidence exists contradicting this automatic thought? Again, be specific and concrete (like in the previous section).	Having gone through the process of challenging an automatic thought, what more accurate and adaptive replacement thought could you now use instead?	Keeping this replacement thought in mind, list the emotions present and re-rate their intensities on a scale of 1 to 100. What shifts occurred?

Thought Record Example

Situation	Emotion/ Rating	Automatic Thought	Cognitive Distortion	Evidence For	Evidence Against	Replacement Thought	Emotion/ Re-rating
Feel external consultants may bypass org and form their own relationships with clients	Anxiety 100 Helplessness 100 Frustration 25-30	I have to deliver - what options do I have? Maybe I shouldn't take on projects I can't deliver on.	Negative mental filter Mind reading Catastrophizing Shoulds and musts Labeling	Consultant came to meeting and overstepped during the design process Deleted logos and sent to organization Happened a few more times.	Almost always consultants who are hired have always delivered with no issues There may be something in my handling that caused this behavior They have the competence for the project	Some people will create their own relationships. Most will stay aligned. This is a part of business. Without hiring consultants, the learning opportunities would have been missed.	Anxiety 40 Helplessness 20 Frustration 15