Cognitive distortions are patterns of thought – usually with a negative swing – which prevent us from seeing things as they really are. Cognitive distortions cause us to spend time bullying ourselves, dwelling on the past, or worrying excessively about the future. They are often called **thinking traps,** because traps are easily to fall into and then they keep people stuck.

There is a tendency to believe that thoughts are completely rational and true in the moment — when in reality, they are just thoughts.

Listed below are the most common types of thinking traps. Whatever thinking traps you tend to fall into, the first step in CBT is to recognise your personal traps in order to change them.

CATASTROPHISING

This thinking trap involves focusing on the worst possible outcome of a situation and not on the most likely or probable outcome.

"I haven't heard from my partner in three hours - what if he's dead?"; "Mum and Dad just had a fight, this means they're going to get a divorce."

OVERGENERALISING

This thinking trap involves making sweeping judgements about ourselves or others based on only one or two experiences, or that a single negative event is a part of a series of unending negative events. These thoughts typically contain the words "always", "never", "everybody" or "nobody". This trap is unhelpful because it doesn't take all situations into account. For example - sometimes we make mistakes, but sometimes we don't.

"Why does this always happen to me?"; "That date was horrible. I am a terrible dater who will never find love."

MIND READING

Mind reading involves assuming someone is thinking negatively without having any definitive evidence. The problem is that we can't read minds, so without evidence, we really don't know what others are thinking.

"My boss hasn't responded to my second email - she must think I am so annoying. I'm probably her least favourite employee." ; "I know everyone is wondering what I'm doing at this party."

FORTUNE-TELLING

Fortune-telling involves imagining that something bad is about to happen and taking this prediction as a fact, even though there is no evidence backing your assumption. The end result of fortune-telling is that you invest a great deal of mental energy ruminating over a negative outcome when, in many cases, it will never come to fruition. In reality, we don't have a crystal ball, so we can't predict the future.

"I'm definitely going to stuff up in my presentation today"; "I know I'm not going to get the job"; "I will be depressed forever"

MAGICAL THINKING

Magical thinking occurs when we believe our thoughts or actions will directly influence and produce a specific outcome. They can provide a false sense of control when we feel out of control, but leads us to feel less worthy and less content with our lives.

"When I lose a few kilograms, I'll feel pretty and I know I will meet my next boyfriend"; "everything will be better when I get a new job"

DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVE

This thinking trap involves unreasonably telling yourself that positive experiences, deeds, or qualities don't count. Discounting the positive takes the joy out of life and makes you feel inadequate and unrewarded.

"I did that project well, but that doesn't mean I'm competent - I just got lucky"; "That person is only complimenting me because they felt they had to, not because they meant it."

EMOTIONAL REASONING

Emotional reasoning involves incorrectly assuming that a feeling reflects something true. It can be good to intuitively listen to emotions, but it is important to not immediately believe them without exploring them and finding evidence to support them.

"I feel lonely, which means no one really loves me or wants to be around me"; "I feel frightened of this situation, which means it is dangerous"

PERSONALISATION

This thinking trap occurs when you hold yourself personally responsible for an event that isn't entirely within your control. It involves assuming events happen or that others are behaving negatively because of you, without considering more plausible explanations for their behaviour.

"The repairman was rude to me because I did something wrong"; "My child is having difficulties at school - this shows what a bad mother I am."

"SHOULD" STATEMENTS

Should statements (also called imperatives) involve telling ourselves that things should be the way we hoped or expected them to be. This thinking trap occurs when we have a precise, fixed idea of how we or others should behave, or overestimate how bad it is that these expectations are not met.

"I should be more patient with my kids"; "I should always run 5km before work"; "my husband shouldn't be so stubborn and argumentative."

ALL OR NOTHING THINKING

All-or-nothing thinking occurs when we see things in black-or-white categories and ignore the grey and all the possible outcomes in-between. If a situation falls short of perfect, you see it as a total failure. If a young woman on a diet eats a spoonful of ice-cream, she tells herself that she has blown her diet completely.

"My friend is mad at me - nobody likes me, I'm totally unlovable and selfish"; "I only have 20 minutes to exercise today, so I just won't work out at all since I don't have my usual hour."

MENTAL FILTER

This thinking trap involves picking out a negative detail in any situation and dwelling on it exclusively - thus perceiving that the whole situation is negative. This prevents us from looking at all the aspects of a situation and drawing a more balanced conclusion.

"Sally looked bored while I was telling a story - even though everyone else laughed, I can't stop thinking about how uninteresting I must be."

LET'S TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE!

(Scenario 1)

You are a stay-at-home mum, and your heart sinks when your husband has just complained that the roast was overdone. The following thought crosses your mind: *"I'm a total failure. I can't stand it. I never do anything right."* These thoughts cause you to feel sad and angry. Which of the following distortions are you using?

a. All-or-nothing thinking
b. Overgeneralisation
c. Mental filter
d. Discounting the positive
e. All of the above

(Scenario 2)

You are about to give a lecture and you notice that your heart is pounding. You feel tense and nervous because you think, *"Oh my gosh, I'll probably forget what I'm supposed to say. I'm a lecturer, I shouldn't be nervous before I give a speech. My mind will blank out. I'll make a fool of myself.*" Which of the following distortions are you using?

a. All-or-nothing thinking
b. Discounting the positive
c. Fortune-telling
d. Should statements
e. Magical thinking

(Scenario 3)

You have put off writing a report for work. Every night when you try to get down to it, the whole project seems so difficult that you watch TV instead. You begin to feel overwhelmed and guilty. You are thinking the following: *"I'm so lazy, I'll never get this done. I just can't do the damn thing. It would take forever. It won't turn out right anyway."* Which of the following distortions are you using?

a. Fortune-telling
b. Overgeneralisation
c. Emotional reasoning
d. Mind reading
e. Catastrophising