

Thinking Distortions

People use Thinking Distortions to change their perception of reality so they can:

- excuse inappropriate behavior
- avoid taking responsibility for their behaviors
- try to convince themselves and others that there is a legitimate reason for their inappropriate behavior
- avoid guilt or other strong feelings
- meet needs for acceptance, self-esteem, love and belonging, control, etc.

Other names for Thinking Distortions:

- cognitive distortions
- thinking errors
- permission-giving statements
- defense mechanisms

People referred for treatment often:

- have used thinking distortions to give themselves permission to offend
- have used thinking distortions after offending to justify the offending behavior
- continue to use thinking distortions to justify their behavior or make it seem more acceptable
- use thinking distortions in their approach to treatment

Most people occasionally have distorted thinking because it is natural for people to want to justify their errors and mistakes. Using thinking distortions also helps people continue to feel good about themselves and avoid bad feelings. For people who offend, using thinking distortions becomes a habit, and they are used more and more frequently. The consequences of using distortions also become more severe.

If people do not change their distorted thinking they are more likely to continue engaging in unhealthy behaviors and will only be able to make a limited amount of progress in treatment. When people choose to continue distorting reality, they are making a choice to not address the real problems in their lives.

In order to make changes, a person must recognize and change their distorted thinking. Don't worry if you do not immediately see the thinking distortions you use. It is usually easier to see them in other people at first, so you will have opportunities to gently give feedback to other members of your group as you notice possible distorted thinking patterns. By the same token, other people might be able to see your thinking distortions before you do. While you are learning to recognize your own distorted thinking, it is important to carefully think about feedback you get from staff and peers

Below are examples of thinking distortions. If you are truly dedicated to making changes and willing to do the work that it will take, it is worth the time and effort to carefully read this paper and learn how to identify thinking distortions. Some of these thinking distortions overlap or are very similar to each other. It is very important to learn how each one of these thinking distortions works and to develop an awareness of how they are used in daily living, so you can identify strategies to change your own thinking errors.

Reducing Responsibility

Justifying / Excuse Making - This is when a person makes it seem like something they did was okay because of something else. The person using justifying as a thinking error finds a reason why s/he should not be held accountable for their actions, or uses it when s/he does not want to take responsibility for an action.

Examples: "It was okay that I stole my neighbor's car because he wasn't using it anyway." "If you can, I can." "I was so lonely I had to..." "S/he yelled at me, so that is why I hit them." "No one listens to me so that's why I can't do anything." "My wife wouldn't have sex with me, what's a man to do?" "He wasn't my natural son, only my stepson." "I did it because I was molested as a child."

Excuses are a means of finding a reason to justify behavior. The person has a reason for everything, and will carefully concentrate on the reason or the excuse that something has happened, rather than accepting responsibility for what has happened. *Examples: "I'm dumb - I couldn't help it." "I don't know." "I was never loved." "My family was poor." "My family was rich." "She/he did not say stop." "I had a bad attorney." "I've never been able to read very well."*

Denial of Intent- This distortion is used to avoid taking responsibility by finding ways to say that the person didn't mean to do what they did. In other words, they didn't *intend* to commit a sexual offense. *Examples: "I didn't know that it was against the law", "she looked older" "It just happened", "it was an accident", "I wasn't really going to meet her, "I was just teaching her"*

Blaming -This is when a person puts the blame on others for their problems. It is similar to justifying or excuse making, but blaming thoughts are targeted specifically at another person or people. Blaming is an excuse to not solve a problem and is used by the person to excuse their behavior. It can also lead to a build-up of resentment toward someone else for "causing" whatever has happened. *Examples: Blaming the probation officer for not letting you leave the county instead of recognizing you have lost the privilege as a result of the crime you committed. "I don't have my assignment with me because my partner didn't put it out on the table for me to bring in." "The trouble with you is you're always looking at me in a critical way", "he was flirting", "she was dressed provocatively"*

Helplessness (Victim Stance)-This is when a person thinks "poor me" when things are not going right. The person does not like to feel they are wrong. The person tries to get other people to feel sorry for them. The "pity pot" is when the person says things in order to get everyone to feel bad for them. If everyone feels bad for the person, they will not confront the person. The person playing the victim interacts with others to invite either criticism, or rescue, from those around them. *Examples: "No one likes me, I have no friends." "I did it because I was abused and everyone has been mean to me all of my life." "Why should I ask questions, my questions are never right." "My family doesn't talk to me anymore and they will be better off without me."*

Minimizing-This is when a person makes things seem smaller than they really are. This is a common thinking error. Often, the person will use words like "just" and "only" to make what they did seem smaller. Trying to reduce the act to make it seem unimportant is a way to make it seem like it is not that bad. *Examples: "I only teased her a little bit, not all the way." "I only screamed at her once." "No biggie. I don't care anyway." "I didn't put it in, I just fondled her." "At least I didn't molest her." "I only had sex with a 14-year-old, it's not like she was a little kid."*

Minimization of Impact- This distortion is used to minimize the effects that the abuse had on the victim(s). *Examples: "I'm the victim, she's fine", "I didn't hurt him", "other people do worse", it's not like she was 5 or something", "he still wants to talk to me so he must be ok", "it was just internet chat", "we just looked at those pictures", "she didn't go to the police"*

Avoidance and Distraction

Fact Stacking-This is when a person may be telling the truth, but they are only focusing on the facts that make them look better. The person arranges the facts for his/ her benefit. *Examples: "My daughter came into my room and demanded to sleep with me. This happened on the night I molested her." (Additional fact omitted by the offender: A thunderstorm had terrified the child and the child was seeking safety and security due to her fears).*

Intellectualizing-This is when a person's experiences have both cognitive (thinking) and emotional (feeling) elements and the person only pays attention to the cognitive piece, while ignoring the emotional portion. The person analyzes their problems in rational ways to avoid their feelings. *Examples: Saying with a straight face without tears or sadness, "My wife left me and I know it will be hard, but I will get along." Sometimes a person quotes books and plays or acts as a "Junior Psychologist." A person can talk about what they learn in treatment but not really internalize the information. They may recite or repeat information but the information does not have an emotional impact on them.*

Keeping Score-This is when a person focuses on what other people are doing and/or saying, or aren't doing and/or saying, in an attempt to compare it to their own behavior and show that what they are doing is acceptable. This may be demonstrated by keeping track of others mistakes and then commenting that their own behavior isn't as bad as the other person's. *Examples: "other people have more victims", "he didn't have to complete that assignment so why should I?"*

Denial of Need for Treatment- the person who uses this distortion is pointing out the reasons that they don't need treatment, in order to avoid looking at, or taking responsibility for their behavior. This distortion can create problems as it eliminates the possibility that a person could commit another offense, which in turn means that they cannot work on reducing risk. *Examples: "it won't happen again", "I learned my lesson", "it only happened once. I'm not a pervert", I've been forgiven", "I did my time"*

Self-Centeredness

Entitlement -This is when a person believes if they want something, they automatically deserve it and if anyone tries to interfere with having it then they are being unfair and unreasonable. This often comes from Core Beliefs related to men, women, relationships, sex, etc. that are the reasons the person believes they deserve what they want. *Examples: "I want treatment to be quick and easy. I want it to be over with. If my therapist disagrees, he or she is holding me back and being unfair." "If I want it, it's mine." "I deserve to have sex with her because I am a man", "men have higher sex drives"*

Grandiosity (I'm unique) -This is when a person believes that they are special and that no one else is like them. Any information applied to other people does not apply to this person. The belief is that the person is different and the rules don't apply to them. This is a form of passive-aggressive behavior and is often used to reject help from those who care about the individual. *Examples: "I know everything and I can handle things alone." "I don't need anyone, no one understands me anyway." "No one can tell me what to do." "At least I didn't rape her; I'm not as bad as the rapists." "I'm different, I need special attention."*

Superoptimism-This is when a person decides that because he wants something to be a certain way, or thinks it will be a certain way, therefore it is. "I think; therefore, it is." This permits the person to function

according to what they want, rather than according to the facts of the situation. This can go beyond wanting, and become a rigid, or even unrealistic expectation, that often is not communicated to the other person or people who are involved, and can lead to feelings of anger, hurt, and disappointment. This also can include someone who has a pattern of focusing on all of the positive changes they've already made in their life in order to avoid looking at what they have left to work on. *Examples: If the person expects someone to visit them at their house, they may not consider that the person may have other plans, or simply the arrangements haven't been made. They fully expect the person to show up. "of course they'll be here". When the person doesn't show up, this gives the person an excuse to explode, be angry, or have a tantrum. Superoptimistic people also believe that they can be famous, popular, strong, movie stars, rich, etc. simply by wishing it, and never take into account the practical steps along the way. "I am a different person", "that was the old me", "I've changed so much since then"*

Over-Simplifying

All or Nothing Thinking-This is when a person uses words like "always" and "never," "everyone" and "no one," "everything" and "nothing." People are either "good" or "bad." If something isn't perfect, it's terrible. If someone doesn't "love" you, they probably "hate" you. The person sees things as black or white, because it seems easier and safer to see them that way than in the shades of gray that most things really come in. *Examples: "There is no point in talking. No one ever listens". "I will never re-offend."*

Assuming (Mind reading)-This is when a person spends a great deal of time assuming what others think, what others feel, what others are doing. Typically this person does not check the facts, the person decides and jumps to conclusions before all the evidence is in. *Examples: "I didn't call because I knew I would be excused since it was my father's funeral." "Well, it's September, and I knew my kids would need school clothes. The 'no-contact' order wouldn't apply in this case since my wife needs money." "I am mad at my partner for not knowing what is wrong with me even though I have not communicated that I am upset. I believe my partner should just know that I am mad and why." "she wouldn't go out with me if she didn't want to have sex." "I bought her dinner, she must know that means we are having sex."*

Focusing on the negative (Catastrophizing)-This is when a person automatically expects the worst of the situation and people. The person makes things worse than they really are by focusing all of their attention on the negative and the things that can go wrong. *Note: this distortion is not thinking of realistic consequences i.e. if I commit a sexual offense, I will go to jail. Examples: "When people give me feedback on my assignments, I think they are attacking me or they don't like me, they are out to get me and I did the assignment wrong." "I was late to work, so now I am going to be fired, which means I won't be able to pay the bills, and I will violate parole and end up back in jail." "if she doesn't have sex with me I will die." "I'll never have a normal relationship. No one will ever have sex with me." "I am a monster. Everyone will hate me if they find out what I have done."*