

COGNITIVE DISTORTION STORY CHANGER

WHY DO WE USE THIS WORKSHEET?

- **Events** cause **thoughts**.
- **Thoughts** lead to **feelings**.
Feelings can lead to actions or **behaviors**.
- Thoughts can be an accurate or inaccurate reflection of facts. Another way to say this is that thoughts can be objective, or they can be biased, based on our past trauma and experiences.
- We may react in unhealthy ways to our emotions, instead of choosing to respond in a healthy way.
- Objective thinking and reframing or applying logic to those thoughts can lead to different feelings, and different responses, instead of just reacting.

PLEASE KEEP IN MIND:

- Thoughts can be accurate or inaccurate reflections of facts, but your feelings are always AUTHENTIC and REAL.
- Feelings are never “wrong”, “incorrect” or “unjustified” or “unwarranted.” Your feelings are REAL and deserve to be seen, heard, and known!

HOW TO USE THIS WORKSHEET:

1. Start in any column, in any order, whether you're trying to identify:
 - Recurring uncomfortable thoughts (THOUGHT)
 - Uncomfortable or painful feelings (FEELINGS)
 - Where an unhealthy reaction of your own is coming from (BEHAVIOR)
 - An event, interaction or discovery that just happened (EVENT)
2. Continue to fill out each column in the first section, in any order.

3. When all columns are filled out, check the THOUGHTS column for cognitive distortions and underline them. This takes getting very honest and vulnerable with yourself. Please be gentle with yourself!
4. When you've identified the cognitive distortions, move to the bottom portion of the worksheet. The event will not change.
5. Take the underlined thoughts above and rescript them.
6. If you get stuck anywhere, get a trusted friend, coach, or your therapist to help you with objective, unbiased analysis of what you're experiencing, or to rescript the thoughts

NOTES

REFERENCE: COMMON DISTORTED AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS OR COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

1. CATASTROPHIZING

This kind of thinking happens when we can only see the worst possible outcome. You might know you need to ask for safe behaviors and recovery efforts from your partner, but assume that he won't respond positively and so you don't ask or don't set and enforce boundaries. Or you may send a text and not get an immediate response and you assume it's because your partner is acting out at that time. Changing "what if...?" statements to "Even if..." can be very empowering.

 **Example:** *"My spouse told me he doesn't know what he feels about me and our relationship. This is it! It's over! He doesn't love me, doesn't care about me and wants to divorce me. I'll never be able to have a relationship that is safe, I won't be able to afford to live on my own, and I will always feel lonely and rejected."*

 **Turn it around:** *"My spouse has an addiction and doesn't have full access to the part of the brain that makes values-based decisions. He doesn't really know what he feels, because he's been medicating his feelings for most of his life and hasn't learned the skills or developed a new capacity to have authentic self-awareness yet."*

Even if this marriage ends, I am still a warm, loving, capable, smart, eager to learn, caring friend to many. I can't see the future and I don't know if I will have a relationship again, but if I want to, nothing is stopping me. I can find ways to live safely, while I build a reserve of resources to have the lifestyle I choose. I don't have to be lonely, because I will always have ways of making new friends, and possibly even romantic relationships."

2. MINDREADING

This type of thinker may assume the role of psychic and may think he or she knows what someone else thinks or feels. The person may think he or she knows what another person thinks or feels despite no external confirmation that his or her assumption is true.

This is extremely common in betrayal trauma, or with people who have suffered any kind of childhood neglect or abuse, and a result of our need to find safety. We have been conditioned to stay hypervigilant to any changes in body language, tone of voice, facial expression, so we can predict what's coming next, and act for our own safety if we need to. While we can probably accurately perceive "something is different", we cannot know exactly what motivates another's change in body language, tone of voice or facial expressions, unless expressed explicitly by that person.

 **Example:** *"My husband refused to talk to me after dinner. He thinks I'm unreasonable and that I want too much, and that I'm a drama queen."*

 **Turn it around:** *"My husband didn't respond to me after dinner. I can't possibly know what another person is thinking or feeling. He could have been struggling with something difficult and not been able to find the words. It's possible his thoughts have absolutely nothing to do with me. I don't know what he's thinking, unless he tells me, so I won't guess or draw conclusions. I'll focus on my own feelings about his silence and self-care until he's ready to communicate."*

3. FORTUNE TELLING OR PREDICTING THE FUTURE

This is where we attempt to predict the future, but usually can only see a negative outcome. Before going to a beach or pool, you might think, "I just know that all women will be in tiny swimsuits and my husband won't be able to stop gawking." Or, "I know what I need from my husband to feel safe, but he won't do it anyway, so why should I even bother to ask?"

 **Example:** *"My husband had a relapse. He will never be able to get completely sober and never embrace recovery. He'll always be a slave to his addiction, and I will never be at peace if I stay in this relationship."*

Or

"I'd like to have a full therapeutic disclosure, read him a losses letter and him write me an amends letter, then go to a couple's intensive for recovering sex addicts and betrayed spouses. But I know he won't say 'yes' so I won't even bother asking."

 **Turn it around:** *I have no concrete way of knowing what tomorrow holds, or what another person is going to choose to do.*

4. PERSONALIZATION

This is when we tend to take things personally. We may think that what other people do is the result of our own actions, character aspects or behaviors. This type of thinking also causes you to blame yourself for circumstances outside your control.

 **Example:** *"He never would have done this to his ex. He's doing this because I gained 5 pounds and didn't keep the house clean."*

 **Turn it around:** *"I don't know if he did, or would have done this to his ex. His behaviors are solely his responsibility, and he can't blame me, or anyone else for his choices. He could have made many other choices that didn't include betrayal."*

5. 'SHOULD' STATEMENTS

Thoughts that include the words "should," "must," or "ought to" are judgements and are almost always related to distorted thinking of cognitive distortions. For example: "I should have lost weight quicker after having kids," or, "I must be more sexually available to be more attractive to my spouse." This type of thinking brings feelings of guilt or shame, or not being "enough" or even "too much". We can also easily make "Should" statements about others in our lives and this often leads us to feel frustrated and bitter when others don't meet our "shoulds". No matter how deeply we may think we know what's best for others, we can't control their choices - so spending any time thinking about what others ought to do, or should have done, is a waste of our

time and effort – and thoughts.

STOP *Example:* “He should have gone to his accountability meeting he missed this week, and he wouldn’t have slipped.”

“I should have stayed home instead of going out with my friends, and he wouldn’t have acted out.”

Turn it around: Replace the word “should” with “could”.

“He could have gone to his accountability meeting he missed this week, and there’s a possibility that he wouldn’t have slipped, but he still might have.”

“I could have stayed home instead of going out with my friends, and maybe he wouldn’t have acted out, maybe he would have. If an addict wants to act out, he can do so with me right in the house with him.”

6. BLACK-AND-WHITE THINKING

These types of thoughts see the world in terms of either/or. Something is either all good or all bad, all right, or all wrong –all or nothing. Black-and-white thinking doesn’t acknowledge that there are always several shades of gray and a tapestry of other colors that exist besides black and white. By seeing only two possible viewpoints or outcomes to something, we ignore the reality of a middle ground.

STOP *Example:* “My spouse admitted he looked at racy pictures on social media in his check-in. He isn’t taking recovery seriously.”

Turn it around: “My spouse admitted he looked at racy pictures on social media in his check-in. His honesty is a new change for him. As painful as it is to hear or imagine him doing that, I am grateful he isn’t hiding his behavior. If it happens again, I can institute stronger boundaries and request he not tell me first, but tell his support team first, then come back to me with a verbally safe version. “

7. MAGNIFYING

This is when we over-dramatize or blow things out of proportion, but not to the point of catastrophizing. It's just like the metaphor "Making a mountain out of a molehill." We literally use our thinking and words to make events bigger, and more meaningful than they are. Saying, "my husband's behavior destroyed my life" is magnifying. Your life is severely impacted, and has caused damage, but you are still alive.

 **Example:** *"My husband missed his accountability meeting, and that means he doesn't care about his own recovery and doesn't really want to change and become a safe person for me."*

 **Turn it around:** *My husband missed his accountability meeting. I can allow myself to feel my feelings about that. I can journal it and ask safe people for feedback. I can bring my concerns to my husband in a safe way, using "I feel" statements. I can make requests and set boundaries to honor my feelings and needs if I want to. I can continue to observe my husband's recovery and watch for patterns of repeated behavior.*

8. MINIMIZING

If you magnify, you might also minimize. Our betrayer typically has this distorted thinking that their behavior "isn't that bad" or "isn't that bad as some other people". Some clues that you're minimizing, is if you think or say, "At least _ _ _ _"

 **Example:** *"My husband confessed to me that he had anxiety at work and was tempted to act out, but he called an accountability friend from his support group and talked through it. So what, he called a member of his group? He was still tempted and that's a big problem."*

"My husband uses porn, but at least he hasn't acted out physically with another person."

 **Turn it around:** *We are all tempted – no one is immune from temptation – it's*

what we do with that temptation that matters. Having emotions is healthy, even difficult emotions, and addicts are learning new healthier coping skills for emotions and temptations. My husband used his new knowledge and skills and took action in a new, healthier direction.

My husband uses porn and my feelings around his behavior are important and matter. It's not "small thing" that he uses porn. It still hurts. It's still important.

9. OVERGENERALIZATION

When we overgeneralize, we make assumptions with only limited data or understanding, when situations really are more complex and nuanced to make generalizations. We can tell we're overgeneralizing when our thoughts include words like, "never," "all," "every," or "always."

 **Example:** *My husband **never** listens to a word I say. **Every** time I talk, he **always** tunes me out. I try to engage him in conversation, but all he **never** listens. **All** I ever do is try, and it's pointless.*

 **Turn it around:** *Sometimes my husband doesn't seem to be listening to what I'm saying. If this happens, I can ask "would you consider giving me your full attention for a few moments, I would like to connect with you on a topic important to me." If he still doesn't seem to be giving me his full attention, I can ask if there's a better time to connect.*

10. DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVE

Similar to black and white thinking and minimizing, happens when we wholly ignore or discount any positive information about a person, conversation, behavior or experience, and only see the negative parts. We also do this when a person compliments us, and we don't accept it, but then respond with a negative perception or judgment about ourselves.

 **Example:** *My husband is has stopped acting out, and doesn't gaslight, lie, blame, or speak unkindly to me at all. He's doing all the work, going to therapy, doing a workbook, staying involved with his support group, and checking in with me on a frequent basis, and I've seen a lot of change from him, a lot of growth. But I just saw a movie that triggered me, and so I don't trust any of this. I just don't see how a person can change.*

 **Turn it around:** *I know that true recovery for my husband and myself isn't all or nothing and can't happen overnight. I can acknowledge what is happening so far and today in my husband's recovery and be grateful for any positive movement forward in my husband's or my own recovery. I can also acknowledge that I am recovering from betrayal trauma, and that I'm going to have good days, and I can also have moments where I feel I am struggling. My own recovery is going to have ups and downs. I can take one day at a time, and stay grounded in my own self-care, and my own thoughts, feelings and needs.*

11. EMOTIONAL REASONING

Thinking your feelings are your reality is emotional reasoning. An example is, If you're scared, there must be real danger. If you have thoughts that you're foolish, then to you, it must be true. This type of thinking can become severe and may lead to obsessive compulsive behavior. For example, a common obsessive behavior is when that person may feel dirty even though he or she has showered twice within the past hour.

 **Example:** *"When my husband pushes back on my boundaries, I feel panic and scared, and I feel so weak for not being able to be confident and enforce my*

boundaries. I'm a weak person. I must be neurotic, or sick, or something is wrong with me, I just feel so strongly about this. "

"When my husband looks at his phone, I feel scared and panic, and suspicious that something is up, even though I have no proof. He's up to something deceptive, I can feel it. I'm just a suspicious person and that's the way I am, and always will be. That's just me."

◆ Turn it around: *I have very strong emotions right now and that makes sense because of the trauma I've experienced in this relationship (and in the past, possibly.) My emotions are temporary feelings based on my thoughts and how I'm assessing a situation. I am not my emotions. When I have strong emotions, it can negatively affect how I think about myself, but I don't have to believe those thoughts. I can do work to change how I think about people, places, things and my past and current experiences.*

12. FILTERING

This cognitive distortion, like discounting the positive, occurs when a person filters out information, and only focuses on the negative, or the positive, or filters out only for past events, not recognizing current events.

STOP Example: *My therapist says I need to work more on self-compassion and being kinder to myself. It's just so hard, with my past and family of origin stuff, and I'll never be able to have self-compassion, so this whole recovery thing just isn't working.*

◆ Turn it around: *I enjoy my support group meetings; the ladies are incredible and always shower me with affirmations and love. My therapist tells me that I've made huge strides in applying my recovery tools. I can be grateful and remember the positive movement forward I've made in my recovery, even if I still have a way to go yet.*

13. LABELING

Labeling happens when we label someone based on limited experience or negative perception of them. This is very common in situations of abuse, labeling the abusive person as, “abuser”, or the person with the addiction, “an addict”, or our spouse who was deceptive as, “a liar”. Or we might struggle with new recovery mindsets or changed behaviors of our own and label ourselves as failures. The problem with this type of thinking, is it reduces people into objects, that are unchangeable and ignores the fact that all humans have the capacity for healthy and unhealthy behavior; can help or hurt; can fulfill other roles, like son, father, brother, friend, volunteer, helper, daughter, mom, sister and so on. Labels limit our understanding of how people behave, and have the capacity to change, if they choose to. When you allow your language to label another human being, you don't hold them responsible for their behavior. Labeling is also a form of having power-over or saying we are “better than” the person because of the label.

STOP **Example:** *I was triggered, and my husband's reaction was to make a face and walk away. He's such a narcissist. He'll always be an addict, so what's the point?*

Turn it around: *I was triggered, and my husband's reaction was to make a face and walk away. I don't know exactly why he can't comfort me right now, and maybe he will be able to in the future if he takes his recovery seriously and works hard at it. I feel so hurt, and angry that he's not able to help me. I can make a request that he work on empathy and amends when I'm triggered and tell him exactly what I need from him in those moments.*

STOP **Example:** *“I went to couples therapy and the therapist asked me to talk about what my needs are. I couldn't verbalize it then and felt so awful and left the office feeling so hopeless. I'm a failure at relationships.”*

Turn it around: *Even though I'm not able to verbalize my feelings yet, I'm willing to keep trying. I've been through some tough experiences and anyone in my position would have a hard time. As long as I keep trying and don't give up, I am winning.*

14. BLAMING

This is the opposite of personalization. Instead of seeing everything as your fault, all the blame is put on someone or something else.

STOP **Example:** *I went to couples therapy and the therapist asked me to talk about what my needs were I couldn't verbalize it then and felt so awful and left feeling so hopeless. That therapist shouldn't be allowed to make people feel awful and hopeless.*

Turn it around: *No one can "make" me feel something. When I feel awful and hopeless, it's because of my experiences and the thoughts I have about myself and others. I can learn to feel, and own my feelings, and do work to challenge and change my thoughts.*

15. 'HEAVEN'S REWARD' FALLACY

In this pattern of thinking, a person may expect divine rewards for his or her sacrifices. People experiencing this distortion tend to put their interests and feelings aside in hopes that they will be rewarded for their selflessness later, but they may become bitter and angry if the reward is never presented.

STOP **Example:** *I kept myself pure until marriage/ prayed for a good husband/ never missed church/ read my bible/ served the poor and still, my husband deceived me, betrayed me and traumatized me.*

I always forgave my husband and encouraged him and prayed for him. I thought God would bless me with a recovered husband and he refused recovery. I'm so angry at God for not keeping up his end of the deal.

Turn it around: *I made decisions to act based on my values of purity, faithfulness, service and love of God. That alone is its own reward, that I walked out my personal values. My relationship with God doesn't have to be transactional, i.e., "if I'm good, God will reward me in earthly ways". I can lament to God, be angry at God and God will still love and accept me, right where I am in my journey to learn who He is.*

16. ALWAYS BEING 'RIGHT'

This kind of thinking causes a person to think his or her opinions are actually facts. They think everyone else should see it as a fact also. Ever witness a debate over “Start Trek vs Star Wars” or “Apple vs Windows”? This type of thinking negates that each person will have a different value or moral palate when weighing the winner and the loser. They also may fail to consider the emotions of other people in the conversation. This kind of cognitive distortion makes it difficult to navigate and sustain healthy and connected relationships, because conversations can be one-sided, and the other person may think they are being discounted or ignored.

STOP Example: *You quarrel with your spouse about whether a movie was good, or bad. You're convinced this is the case all the time, while your partner believes it was a good movie. Since your partner doesn't value the movie the same way you do, you become angry and may say things that demean your partner's ability to evaluate a movie.*

You see them getting upset, but you continue to press the point that your opinion is fact, argument to prove your point.

Example: *The lasagna at dinner is just horrible and anyone who doesn't agree, doesn't know how to make good lasagna!*

Turn it around: *Turn it around: I didn't care for the movie/lasagna at dinner and won't order it/see it again. It wasn't right *for me*. I'm glad you enjoyed. It just wasn't to my liking.*

17. SELF-SERVING BIAS

A person experiencing self-serving bias may take credit for all positive events and at the same time, blame any negative events as outside their control. This is common with people who refuse to admit mistakes or flaws and to live in a distorted reality where they can do no wrong and have no need to improve.

Example: *This family wouldn't be together if it weren't for me holding the boundaries*

of therapy for everyone. When I'm unhappy or if I lose my temper and lash out, or angry about anything unrelated to my relationship, it's only because of my husband's past behaviors. It's his fault that I can't experience happiness about anything or manage my temper.

◆ Turn it around: *I'm grateful my husband (and children) are willingly going to therapy and making changes in their responses. I'm only responsible for myself: my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and no one else is responsible for me: changing my thoughts, feelings and behaviors. If I lose my temper, it's because I'm not slowing down and evaluating my thoughts, feelings and needs. If my family seems to be moving forward in healing, it's because they're doing the work.*

18. FALLACY OF CHANGE

This distortion believes that our spouse (or others) have to change their behavior in order for us to feel happy or safe. This type of thinking encourages the belief that we don't have to take action on our own healing or growth, and others have the responsibility to adjust to our particular needs. It's a form of irresponsibility – for our own health and best interests.

STOP Example: *I can't stand it that my husband still talks to his cousin who cheated on his wife. I can't be happy until he cuts off that relationship and they never talk again. My husband won't give his obnoxious sister boundaries when she loses her cool at holiday dinners. It just reminds me of how his family dysfunctions played into his addiction and betrayal. I just will never be happy until he gives her a piece of his mind and tells her off when she acts up.*
My husband isn't in real recovery, and I don't see any change in him. I just can't be happy and feel safe, calm or any joy until I see him making major changes in how he lives his life and behaves.

◆ Turn it around: *No one can "make me feel" anything. My feelings are a direct result of my own thoughts, observations, assessments, judgments, valuations about what I experience. I cannot control what other people do or think, but I can control what I do*

or think. If something upsets me, or pushes against my own values, I can enforce a boundary around what I think about it. I can accept that others are imperfect and have different values and make choices I don't agree with. I have choices in how I think, and how I perform my own self-care around feelings that are uncomfortable.

My safety, happiness and well-being are not dependent upon another person's choices. If I don't agree with my husband's choices, or how he participates in our relationship, I can enforce boundaries to pull back or mindfully limit my emotional and physical vulnerability to him and his behaviors. I can remind myself that my authentic safety lies in my own values, boundaries, self-care, safety plan, and knowing how to discern who is safe, and who is not in my support community. I can research and weigh all my options, up to and including leaving this relationship on my own timeline and my own terms.

19. FALLACY OF FAIRNESS

This type of thinking assumes that everyone must always weigh decisions and actions based on what's fairness and equal and best for everyone,, when in reality the world can't always operate that way. An example of this type of thinking sees infidelity justified if a person's partner has cheated, or keeping the money if a cashier gives you too much change, 'because the store makes huge profits anyway.'

 **Example:** *I'm going to look up my crush from college on social media. What's good for the goose is good for the gander, right?*

 **Turn it around:** *Even if my partner cannot live according to my own values of loyalty, honesty, and emotional and sexual sobriety, I can. I can acknowledge that his behavior isn't fair and the power dynamic hasn't been equal because of his deception. If I do the same things as he's done, then I am betraying my own personal values of loyalty, honesty, sobriety, and fairness. Two "wrongs" do not make a "right", they just make two wrongs, and there is no such thing as "evening the score". I'll probably feel remorse about myself after I make such an attempt. I can acknowledge that I have painful emotions, and may feel hurt, sad, vulnerable, and susceptible due to the disempowering actions of my partner, but that 'getting even' will not empower me.*

20. CONTROL FALLACY

This is about the concept of “locus of control”, which is defined as: “A locus of control orientation is a belief about whether the outcomes of our actions are contingent on what we do (internal control orientation) or on events outside our personal control (external control orientation).” (Zimbardo, 1985, p. 275)

If you see things as mostly internally controlled, you may blame or fault yourself for things that aren't within your control., such as our husband's behaviors, moods, or feelings. If you see things externally controlled, you might blame your child's teachers for your child's poor overall academic performance.

STOP *Example: If I had been a better listener or sexier, my husband wouldn't have betrayed me by acting out and deception.*

I'm so angry with my mother-in-law, it was her constant meddling and enmeshment that made my husband act out. If it wasn't for her, my husband wouldn't have cheated.

Turn it around: *There is no such thing as a perfect partner, and there may be places where I can grow to be a better listener, communicator and more emotionally available to my partner. However, this has absolutely nothing to do with my partner's choices to act out and deceive me. If he was unhappy in the relationship, he had several other healthier choices he could have made to improve our relationship. His addiction started long before he and I became a couple, and no matter who he married, it was only a matter of time before his acting out would have been exposed. Bottom line: The cause of his behaviors has nothing to do with me, and I have zero control over his future choices.*

Though my mother-in-law's behaviors have crossed several boundaries, my husband is wholly responsible for his choices and behaviors. No one forced him to make bad choices that harmed our relationship and me. It's my husband's responsibility to protect our relationship and put it before all other relationships – his family of origin, his addiction and everything else.

HOW TO CHANGE COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

For many, one or more of these cognitive distortions will look familiar. The good news is that cognitive distortions can be turned around with your own intentional thinking, and with practice, can become very comfortable.

TRY asking yourself the following questions to challenge automatic thinking:

- How do I know if this thought is accurate?
- Can I acknowledge that I may not have all the information?
- What evidence do I have to support this thought or belief?
- How can I test my assumptions/beliefs to find out if they're accurate?
- Do I have a trusted friend who I can check out these thoughts with?
What would ___ say about this thought?
- Is this thought helpful?
- Are there other ways that I can think about this situation or myself?
- Am I blaming myself unnecessarily?
- Am I placing responsibility for my thoughts and feelings on something or someone else? (vs. holding someone else accountable for their harmful behavior)
- What or who else contributed to this situation?
- Is it really in my control?
- Am I overgeneralizing?
- Am I making assumptions?
- What would I say to a friend in this situation?
- Can I look for "shades of gray"?
- Am I assuming the worst?
- Am I holding myself or someone else to an unreasonable or double standard?
- Are there exceptions to these absolutes (always, never)?
- Am I making this personal when it isn't?
- Can I change a "what if" statement, to an "even if it's true" statement?

EVENT <i>Just the facts, what could be recorded with a video camera</i>	THOUGHT <i>The story I made up in my head is...</i>	FEELING <i>Just the words, from the Feelings Wheel</i>	BEHAVIOR <i>What you did in <u>reaction</u> to the event</i>
	<i>Assuming positive intent, the thoughts I had were or what an objective friend might say about it</i>	<i>Just the words, from the Feelings Wheel</i>	<i>What you might do differently in <u>response</u> to the event</i>

NOTES

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