

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

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

Most people occasionally have distorted thinking because it is natural for people to want to justify their errors and mistakes. Using thinking distortions helps people continue to feel good about themselves and avoid bad feelings. For people who offend, thinking distortions become a *way of life* and the person eventually uses them most of the time.

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. Continuing to distort reality is making a choice not to deal with the real problems in their life effectively.

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.

The Thinking Distortions

Acting Out-This is when a person reduces their feelings of tension, anger or fear by behaving in inappropriate ways. *Example: Starting a fight to avoid facing uncomfortable feelings. Vandalizing or stealing property to feel powerful and in-control.*

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. *Example: “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.”*

Blaming-This is when a person puts the blame on others for their problems. 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. *Example: 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.”*

Defensiveness-This is when a person is selective, closed-minded, and self-righteous. The person shuts down, and may be argumentative. The person may blame others, or put others down to deflect any confrontation. The person stops listening to what others have to say, and often interrupts others to get their point across. *Example: Arguing with group members when receiving feedback on an assignment. Comments like “yes...BUT...”*

Displacement-People use displacement when they have feelings toward one person that they don’t feel safe expressing to them, so instead they put those feelings onto someone else. *Example: Feeling stressed about an upcoming court date, you pick a fight with your wife. You’re angry with your boss but are afraid you would get fired if you tell him off, so you yell at your children when you get home.*

Drama-Excitement-This is when a person is not getting their needs met directly, so they do anything and everything for drama and excitement instead. To the person using drama-excitement, boredom is the main evil. Excitement is generated at anyone's expense. The person using this technique may instigate fights and stand back as an innocent bystander. Perhaps the person provides upsetting information to others to set up the fight.

Excuse Making-This is when a person makes excuses, especially when being held accountable for their actions. 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."

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. *Example: "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, its mine."*

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. *Example: "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).*

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. *Example: "I won't have fun at the party because my friends are not going, so I am not going to go." "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." "If I am confronted about being late to work, I start thinking I am going to be fired, I can't pay the bills, I am going to be violated on parole, I am going to jail and I work myself up into a panic."*

Fronting-This is when a person presents themselves as helpful or agreeable, when they are really trying to manipulate others so that they won't be confronted. When a person is being phony or fronting by being a "nice person," they will feel something is owed back to them. Another way of fronting can be when a person uses an image or a mask. The person may go out of their way or act overly nice but there is a great deal of manipulation taking place. The person will act one way but deep down inside they are acting a certain way to get something they want. *For example; I agree and accept what the others are saying, when I'm really thinking; "If I am nice and agree with them, they will leave me alone." The expectation with this thinking error is "since I'm nice to you, you must be nice to me." "I will do my homework assignments and pretend I agree with them so that I can get out of treatment, but I really do not believe anything these people are saying to me."*

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. *Example: "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."*

Helpless (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 with out me.”*

The Hop-overs-This is when a person diverts the conversation to something more comfortable. Hop-overs are also known as sidetracking or "changing the subject." If the person is asked about one issue, s/he may “hop-over” to another issue or an issue that is related, but never answer the specific question asked. The person, by hopping over the real question, often can have control over others if others respond to the question they asked. Hop-overs allow the person to keep everyone else moving about, answering questions while he/she avoids dealing with the issue at hand. *Example: Question: “Why didn’t you complete your assignment?” Answer: “Are you aware that there are some treatment programs in the state of New York that do not require written assignments?”*

Intellectualization-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. *Example: 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.*

Justifying-This is when a person explains the reason for their behavior by saying something they did was okay because of something else. Justifying is very much like blaming or excuse making. The person using justifying as a thinking error finds a reason for any and all issues that s/he does not wish to own or take responsibility for. *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.” “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.”*

Keeping Score-This is when a person is angry and hostile inside, but rather than working on the problems, the person will choose to deal with the anger and hostility by keeping track of mistakes others make. If the person is criticized, the person will avoid looking at the criticism and instead will attempt to keep track of the criticisms other people are receiving. The person will then calculate to find out if s/he is receiving more criticisms than others. *Example: The offender keeps track of when s/he is confronted by others and when other people are presenting their assignments the offender will confront others to “get even.”*

Lying-Lying is one of the most commonly thinking errors used by people who sexually offend. Lying is a power play and is used to confuse, distort, and make fools of other people. There are two basic kinds of lies:

Commission-*making things up that are simply not true. This kind of lie is simple and clear. The person simply says things that are not true and that have not happened.*

Omission-*partly saying what is true, but leaving out major sections. The person states things that are partly true, but carefully leaves out certain things. So even though what the person is saying may be true, there are many important parts that are left out.*

Minimization-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."*

My Way-This is when a person has a great need for power and does not want to be under the control or power of someone else. People tend to want things to be done on their own terms and under their own conditions. When this thinking error is used, people will appear to not listen to what question is being asked and will simply, when called upon, answer the question that they wanted to answer. If a certain rule has been established, the person will press the issue. *Example: "I will do it my way" (regardless of rules, regulations, and guidelines).*

Self-Focused-This is when a person is very selfish and thinks of their needs before the needs of others. When the person comes into treatment, the person often needs to set up other people so that their needs are constantly being met. The person will want to do things so that they receive "pats on the head." The person wants to be noticed, coddled, and certainly wants to avoid feeling badly. *Examples: The person purposely acts in ways so that others will notice or applaud. If the offenders are to hand in written assignments to the secretary, the person who is using this thinking error will want to hand in the assignment personally to the therapist. The offender completes assignments for the purpose of gaining approval from the therapists rather than for the purpose of learning or changing behavior.*

Power Plays-This is when a person tries to get the upper hand whenever they aren't getting their way in a situation. *Example: Walking out of a room during a disagreement, giving up responsibilities, not completing a job that s/he agrees to do, refusing to listen or hear what someone else has to say, or organizing people to be angry at others.*

Procrastinate-This is when a person puts off from day to day, delays, or defers to a future time. This is done to put off the need to take action. *Example: "I will bring up the problem tomorrow. I just don't feel like discussing it now."*

Rationalization (excuse making)-This is when a person tells a logical (or sometimes even illogical) reason why they did what they did. It sounds like it was the reason they did it, but in reality it was not. *Example: "I skipped taking the trash out last night because it was raining" (when you had no intention of taking the trash out whether it was raining or not). Hint: ask*

yourself, if the reason I gave did not exist, would I have done the behavior anyway? If you would have done it anyway, then the reason you are giving is a rationalization. In the example the behavior of skipping taking the trash out would have happened even if it had not rained. This is like an excuse for what the person did or didn't do).

Repression-This is when a person tries to push out of memory the things that are unpleasant or painful. *Example: Trying not to think about or talk about your girlfriend breaking up with you. Saying you can't remember the details of your offense.*

Superoptimism-This is when a person decides that because he wants some things 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. *Examples: If the person expects someone to visit them at their house, they may not take into account that the person may have other plans, or simply the arrangements haven't been made. They fully expect the person to show up. 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.*

Vagueness-This is when a person is unclear and non-specific in order to avoid being pinned down on a particular issue. This person is non-committal, and uses words and phrases to talk in a way that makes him or her look good to others, but not to commit to anything. Vagueness is a clear and intentioned action to avoid being pinned down. If the person is vague and unclear, then the reality of his/ her actions can never be examined. The person may also act puzzled or confused about the reality of the situation. *Examples: Vague words such as: "I more or less think so," "I guess," "probably," "maybe," "I might," "I'm not sure about this," "It possibly was," "I can't remember my childhood," etc. This technique is especially used by people in understanding the guidelines of treatment. The person can remain puzzled and confused, and will believe they do not have to follow the rules because they were confused.*

You're Okay, I'm Okay-This is when a person is extremely positive in order to avoid looking at the reality of the situation. The person will often work hard at being cooperative, helpful, and supportive of others. This person may be the one in group who wishes to give compliments and who will be constantly humorous. The person may want to initiate activities or assignments in group that will make others feel better. In actuality, the person does not care if other people feel better. The person simply wants to have an air of happiness or positiveness in the group so that the negative aspects of the situation will be avoided. *Example: If the person can manipulate others into thinking in positive terms, the person has control and will not have to look at the reality of the crime that has been committed. Rather than thinking about the situation and the damage that has been caused to their victim, the offender will put forth effort into thinking positive.*