

Depression, Anxiety and Perfectionism: Spiritual Action Plans

What's a *cognitive distortion* and why do so many people have them? Cognitive distortions are simply ways that our mind convinces us of something that isn't really true. These inaccurate thoughts are usually used to reinforce negative thinking or emotions — telling ourselves things that sound rational and accurate, but really only serve to keep us feeling bad about ourselves.

Common Cognitive Distortions

Filtering.

We take the negative details and magnify them while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation. For instance, a person may pick out a single, unpleasant detail and dwell on it exclusively so that their vision of reality becomes darkened or distorted.

Polarized Thinking (or “Black and White” Thinking).

In polarized thinking, things are either “black-or-white.” We have to be perfect or we're a failure — there is no middle ground. You place people or situations in “either/or” categories, with no shades of gray or allowing for the complexity of most people and situations. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.

Catastrophizing.

We expect disaster to strike, no matter what. This is also referred to as “magnifying or minimizing.” We hear about a problem and use *what if* questions (e.g., “What if tragedy strikes?” “What if it happens to me?”). For example, a person might exaggerate the importance of insignificant events (such as their mistake, or someone else's achievement). Or they may inappropriately shrink the magnitude of significant events until they appear tiny (for example, a person's own desirable qualities or someone else's imperfections).

Personalization.

Personalization is a distortion where a person believes that everything others do or say is some kind of direct, personal reaction to the person. We also compare ourselves to others trying to determine who is smarter, better looking, etc. A person engaging in personalization may also see themselves as the cause of some unhealthy external event that they were not responsible for. For example, “We were late to the dinner party and *caused* the hostess to overcook the meal. If I had only pushed my husband to leave on time, this wouldn't have happened.”

Shoulds.

We have a list of ironclad rules about how others and we should behave. People who break the rules make us angry, and we feel guilty when we violate these rules. A person may often believe they are trying to motivate themselves with shoulds and shouldn'ts, as if they have to be punished before they can do anything. For example, “I really should exercise. I shouldn't be so lazy.” The words *must* and *ought* are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When a person directs *should statements* toward others, they often feel anger, frustration and resentment.

Cognitive Behavioral Strategies to Combat Cognitive Distortions

Examine the Evidence.

A thorough examination of an experience allows us to identify the basis for our distorted thoughts. If we are quite self-critical, then, we should identify a number of experiences and situations where we had success.

Double Standard Method.

An alternative to “self-talk” that is harsh and demeaning is to talk to ourselves in the same compassionate and caring way that we would talk with a friend in a similar situation.

Thinking in Shades of Gray.

Instead of thinking about our problem or predicament in an either-or polarity, evaluate things on a scale of 0-100. When a plan or goal is not fully realized, think about and evaluate the experience as a partial success, again, on a scale of 0-100.

Survey Method.

It's helpful to seek the opinions of others regarding whether our thoughts and attitudes are realistic. If we believe that our anxiety about an upcoming event is unwarranted, check with a few trusted friends or relatives.

Definitions.

What does it mean to define ourselves as “inferior,” “a loser,” “a fool,” or “abnormal.” An examination of these and other global labels likely will reveal that they more closely represent specific behaviors, or an identifiable behavior pattern instead of the total person.

Spiritual Action Plan

Weaknesses

What are the areas that I would like to change about myself?

Examples: depression, anxiety, anger, distorted thinking, perfectionism, filtering

Strengths

What do I want my weaknesses to turn into? What would the opposite of this weakness be?

Examples: happiness, peace, contentment, confidence, self compassion, tranquility, kindness

Action Plan

What can I do to make these strengths become more a reality in my life? What small things can I do to make these changes happen?

Examples: smile more at people when I say hi, reach out to others for help when I'm stressed, ask people I trust for feedback on how they think I'm doing, go for a walk when I'm nervous, read my patriarchal blessing when I feel I'm not good enough, say something nice to my family members once a day.

Spiritual Piece

Take your action plan to your Father in Heaven. Tell Him, "I know that I can't make depression, anxiety or anger go away all on my own but this is what I can do. I can... (tell Him about your action plan)".

Morning prayers: tell Him what you're going to work on that day.

Evening prayers: return and report on how you did. Thank Him for how you felt His help that day.