

Anxious Cognitive Distortions

1. **Fortune Telling:** "Something bad is going to happen." "I know I will fail." "I'm going to lose my job." "They will think I'm stupid or crazy." Fortune Telling usually involves predicting a negative future outcome.
2. **Magnification (exaggeration or catastrophizing):** "I will be like this the rest of my life." "This panic attack is causing me to be totally dysfunctional." "I will lose everything and become homeless." "This panic attack will lead to a heart attack or stroke." Exaggerating reality in your thinking magnifies anxiety in your body. Magnification is enlarging your problem to an irrational extent. The worst outcome rarely happens.
3. **Mind Reading:** "I can tell he doesn't like me." "They can tell I'm anxious and falling apart." "I'm looking so anxious people will think I'm stupid."
4. **Emotional Reasoning:** "I feel like I am dying." "I feel like I'm having a heart attack." "I feel trapped in this situation." The upspoken reasoning is that, "if I feel it, it must be true." Feelings are not facts. Don't use feelings as evidence!
5. **All or Nothing Thinking:** "They will hate me or love me." "I will be a great success or a miserable failure." "No one ever likes me." "Everyone is better than me." "My friend is more attractive/intelligent/wealthy than I am." "If my spouse doesn't help me more around the house, I will have to get a divorce." Operating in the extremes creates additional emotional stress. Practice moderate thinking. There are many moderate choices between the extremes. Find them!
6. **Perfectionism:** "I need to perform perfectly for them to like or accept me." "I have to get this right so I won't look bad." No one performs perfectly all the time. Trying to be perfect actually drives anxiety.
7. **Negative Filter/Discounting the Positives:** "We never have enough money." "We don't have enough money to be happy." "My job sucks, my spouse is a jerk, my kids pose one problem after another, and now this anxiety is wrecking my life as well." Negative filtering is looking at what is going wrong in your life rather than what is working. Stop discounting the positives. Simply refocus on what is working well, what you are grateful for, what you are pleased with. Stop ignoring what is working well in your life. In short, stop looking at the hole instead of the donut.
8. **Control Fallacies:** "My job as a competent human being is to control my life, take total charge. I should be able to control everything that matters in my life. I should be able to control my body, my thinking, my emotions, my job, my kids, my boss, cloud formations, and the Hubble telescope. I should be able to control the universe." Can you control your digestion? Can you control the weather to suit your needs? Can you control what your kids, your spouse, or your boss say to you? Can you control the flight of time? Trying to control things creates anxiety. Do you want to be in the anxiety creation business?
9. **"What If" Thinking:** "What if," is the most famous phrase of the anxious person: "What if I faint?" "What if I can't talk?" "What if I become homeless?" "What if I get hurt?" "What if I'm really sick?" "What if this happens, what if that happens" can generate much worry and anxiety. Most of the things we "what if" about never actually happen!

Adapted from David Burns, MD with additional commentary by Steven Marcus, Ph.D.