

# Distorted Thinking Patterns

Distorted thinking is more common than ever during a time when we are bombarded with information day after day. Unfortunately, so much of this input is misinformation propagated through distorted thinking patterns rather than through critical thinking processes. Distorted thinking impacts our communication and hence the quality of our work with groups. So let's spend a few minutes reviewing common modes of distorted thinking identified by Albert Ellis in his work with Rational Emotive Therapy.

## Examples of Distorted Thinking

### Filtering

Distortion is characterized by looking at only one element of a situation to the exclusion of everything else. The single detail is picked out and the whole event is then coloured by this detail.

People tend to have their specific focus when looking for the detail to colour their perceptions. Depressed people tend to focus on the loss and become blind to any positive that may exist in the situation. Others, prone to anxiety select the danger, and those that tend to be angry tend to see only the injustice.

The process of remembering can also be selective. Recalling only the negative creates a tendency to be angry, anxious, or depressed. The filtering process causes people to magnify and 'awfulize'. The end result is all fears and losses become exaggerated in importance. Key words for filtering are: terrible, awful, disgusting, horrendous.

### Polarized Thinking

Characterized by a dichotomous view of the world. Tendency is to see everything in extremes with little room for the middle ground. People and things are either good, bad, wonderful, awful, black or white. There is no grey. Reactions to events tend to swing from one emotional extreme to another. The impact is to judge self and others in the extreme. There is no room for mistakes. If leaders are not perfect then they are useless.

### Over Generalization

In this distorted mode of thinking, one makes broad, generalized conclusions based on a single incident or piece of evidence. Often over generalizations are couched in absolute statements. Typical statements are "I'll never trust management again," "nobody is capable of getting this done but me," "I always have to do everything around here." Words such as all.. .every.. .none.. .never. . .always... everybody. ..nobody are cues of when someone is over generalizing.

## **Mind Reading**

We do this when we make snap judgments about others. Mostly people are making assumptions about others motivations, feelings, and attitudes when they are employing this distorted thinking style. Often mind reading assumptions are based on projections, or self attributes that we prefer to not admit or own. We may focus on someone's lateness but overlook our own tendency towards the same problem. We jump to conclusions without collecting more data to verify the reality. As well we tend to overlook our own attributions and attribute personal experience to others.

## **Catastrophizing**

In this style one takes a small piece of evidence, then expands and dramatizes it to the extreme. A small mistake means you'll never be promoted, a moderate rating means that you'll be sacked, a fight means that the relationship is over. Catastrophizing can be contagious as the emotional re-activeness spreads across those closely associated.

## **Personalization**

The tendency to relate everything around you to yourself. This can be either negative or positive in the sense that you consider "any success as a result of your contribution," or "any failure is certainly your fault." Comments made by others are interpreted in a personal manner. The boss says "we're falling behind on this project" in a meeting and the 'personalizer' is convinced that he is talking about them. Each experience or conversation is interpreted as a clue to your personal worth or value.

## **Control Fallacies**

There are two ways this can go. You either see yourself as helpless and externally controlled, or as omnipotent and responsible for everyone around you.

Feeling externally controlled keeps you stuck: "They are doing it to you." Failing to take any personally responsibility tends to keep one stuck in helplessness and leads to serious depression. Focusing on only those things that are beyond your control contributes to this style of thinking.

When one feels responsible for everything and everyone around them there is a tendency to feel the weight of the world on their shoulders. Everyone is depending on you, you cannot make mistakes, and you have to right all wrongs. Failure to live up to these notions creates guilt as well as an exaggerated sense of power.

# Recognize and Intervene on Distorted Thinking

Irrational or distorted thinking blocks authentic communication, the source of cooperation, understanding and effective solutions.

## Intervention Skill

Distorted thinking can and does impact effective communication and thus should be identified and corrected to improve group process. Learn to identify and intervene on the following modes of distorted thinking in your groups.

## Application

### Fallacy of Fairness

Two people seldom agree on what's fair, and generally there is no court or final arbitrator to decide. Fairness is subjective and based on subjective assessment. Usually it involves a sense of not achieving what is hoped for or desired and tends to be self serving. Usually there are conditional assumptions, "if he really knew how much I contribute he'd give me that promotion." Unfortunately we all see this differently and as a result, fair is person specific not general.

### Emotional Reasoning

What you feel must be true. "If you feel like a loser you must be a loser, if you feel cheated you must have been cheated." Emotions are treated as if they are fact when in fact they are simply one data point and reflect subjective responses to experience. Always believing your emotions is like believing everything you read or everything you think...bad idea.

### Fallacy of Change

This assumes that if you pressure people enough they will change to suit you. You tend to focus on other's change as a means of making yourself feel better. We see this in marriage regularly. "If he'd just act this way, I'd be happy." In truth the only person we can change is ourselves. Sometimes this does induce change in others, but don't count on it.

### Global Labelling

Grains of truth become generalized to a global judgment. "All democrats are liberal imbeciles." Or, "All Republicans are corporate profit taking greedy aristocrats." Stereotypes and one-dimensional thinking polarizes and reduces the ability to work cooperatively.

### Blaming

If someone else is responsible then we can all feel a sense of relief. This of course precludes any responsibility for self. Often we combine this with mind-reading and

expect others to know what we want or need. I could have said "no" to the additional work rather than blame my boss for putting me into this time crunch.

### **Shoulds**

This distortion operates from a list of inflexible rules about how you and others should act. The rules are right and indisputable. Any deviation is bad. As a result you are in a position to judge and find fault. Cue words include "should, ought, and must." Shoulds affect others (whom we judge) as well as ourselves as we feel compelled to act in a certain way as a result. Karen Homey calls this "the tyranny of shoulds."

### **Being Right**

In this distortion you are usually defensive. You must continually prove that you are right or correct. Your assumptions about the world and your actions are always right. This makes it very difficult to hear new or alternative points of view, because you tend to ignore and are busy building your argument to prove your rightness. Besides making you hard of hearing, this distortion tends to make you lonely because being right becomes more important than honest and caring relationships.

### **Heaven's Reward Fallacy**

In this distortion we always do the right thing in hope of reward at a later date. You sacrifice and slave while collecting brownie points that you can cash in some day. Saints are tough to live with.

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