

Checklist of Negative and Positive Distortions*

Distortion	Negative Distortion Example	Positive Distortion Example
1. All-or-Nothing Thinking. You think about yourself or the world in black-or-white, all-or-nothing categories. Shades of gray do not exist.	When you fail, you may tell yourself that you're a complete failure.	When you succeed, you may tell yourself that you're a winner and feel superior.
2. Overgeneralization. You think about a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat or a positive event as a never-ending pattern of success.	When you're rejected by someone you care about, you may tell yourself that you're an unlovable loser who will be alone and miserable <i>forever</i> .	When you overcome an episode of depression or self-doubt, and you're suddenly feeling happy again, you may tell yourself that all your problems are solved and that you'll <i>always</i> feel happy.
3. Mental Filter. You think exclusively about your shortcomings and ignore your positive qualities and accomplishments. Or, you dwell on the positives and overlook the negatives.	A TV talk show host told me that he typically received hundreds of enthusiastic emails from fans every day, but there was nearly always one critical email from a disgruntled viewer. He explained that he'd obsess for hours about the negative email and completely overlook the hundreds of glowing ones. As a result, he constantly struggled with feelings of anxiety and low self-esteem in spite of his tremendous ratings and popularity.	You may fantasize about how good that desert will taste, and ignore the negatives, like gaining weight and feeling guilty or bloated afterwards. Or, you may tell yourself how <i>great</i> you'll feel if you have a drink, and ignore the fact you nearly always drink too much and end up with a hangover.
4. Discounting the Facts. You tell yourself that negative or positive facts don't count, so as to maintain a universally negative or positive self-image.	Discounting the Positive: When someone genuinely compliments you, you may tell yourself they're only saying that to make you feel good.	Discounting the Negative: When you're trying to diet and feeling tempted by something tasty, you may tell yourself, "I'll only have one little bite." But you've probably given yourself this message on hundreds of occasions, and it has never once been accurate! During an argument, you may get defensive and insist that the other person is "wrong." Then the conflict escalates.
5. Jumping to Conclusions. You jump to conclusions that aren't warranted by the facts. There are two common forms: Mind-Reading , you make assumptions about how other people are thinking and feeling. Fortune-Telling , you make dogmatic negative or positive predictions about the future.	Mind-Reading: If you're feeling shy at a party, you may tell yourself that other people don't have to struggle with shyness or that they'd look down on you if they knew you were shy. Fortune-Telling: When you're depressed, you may tell yourself that you'll <i>never</i> recover. When you're feeling anxious, you may tell yourself that something <i>terrible</i> is about to happen—"When I give my talk, my mind will go blank. I'll look like an idiot."	Mind-Reading: You may tell yourself that a relationship is going really well when the other person is actually feeling annoyed or unhappy with you. Fortune-Telling: You may tell yourself, "I'll just have one drink" or "one bite," when, in fact, you <i>never</i> stop at just one drink or bite.

<p>6. Magnification and Minimization. You blow things out of proportion or shrink their importance inappropriately. This is also called the “binocular trick” because it’s like looking through the ends of a pair of binoculars, so things either look much bigger, or much smaller, than they are in reality.</p>	<p>When you’re procrastinating, you may think about <i>everything</i> that you’ve been putting off and tell yourself how <i>overwhelming</i> all those tasks will be. (Magnification) You may also tell yourself that you’re efforts today wouldn’t amount to anything anyway, so you might as well put it off. (Minimization)</p>	<p>When you’re trying to diet and you’re feeling tempted, you may tell yourself: “This ice cream will taste so <i>good!</i>” (Magnification). Will it <i>really</i> be that good? Will it be worth the way you’ll feel about yourself after you give in to the urge to binge?</p>
<p>7. Emotional Reasoning. You reason from how you feel. In point of fact, your feelings result from your thoughts, and not from what’s actually happening. If your thoughts are distorted, your feelings will be as misleading as the grotesque images you see in curved funhouse mirrors.</p>	<p>You may tell yourself, “I’ll clean my desk (or start my diet) when I’m more in the mood. I just don’t <i>feel</i> like it right now.” Or course, the feeling never comes! When you’re depressed, you may tell yourself, “I <i>feel</i> like a loser, so I must really <i>be</i> one.” Or “I <i>feel</i> hopeless, so I must <i>be</i> hopeless.”</p>	<p>When you’re gambling, you may say, “I feel lucky! I just <i>know</i> I’m about to hit the jackpot.” This distortion also triggers romantic intoxication. When you meet someone attractive, you may feel so happy and excited that you think that he or she <i>must be</i> wonderful—the man (or woman) of your dreams.</p>
<p>8. Should Statements. You make yourself (or others) miserable with “shoulds,” “musts” or “ought to’s.” Self-Directed Shoulds cause feelings of guilt, shame, depression, and worthlessness. Other-Directed Shoulds cause feelings of anger and trigger interpersonal conflict. World-Directed Shoulds cause feelings of frustration and entitlement. Hidden Shoulds are implied by negative thoughts.</p>	<p>Self-Directed Shoulds: You tell yourself that you <i>shouldn’t</i> have screwed up and made such a stupid mistake. Other-Directed Shoulds: You may tell yourself, “That fellow <i>shouldn’t</i> cut in front of me in traffic like that. I’ll show him that he can’t get away with it!” World-Directed Shoulds: “The train <i>shouldn’t</i> be late when I’m in such a hurry!”</p>	<p>Self-Directed Shoulds: When you’re feeling tempted, you may tell yourself, “I’ve had a hard day. I deserve a drink (or a nice dish of ice cream).” Other-Directed Shoulds: You may tell yourself that your values are the best values and that other people should think and feel the same way. World-Directed Shoulds: You may tell yourself that the world should be the way you expect it to be.</p>
<p>9. Labeling. You label yourself or others instead. Labeling is actually an extreme form of overgeneralization, because you see your entire self or essence as defective and globally bad, or superior.</p>	<p>You may label yourself or someone you’re not getting along with as “a loser” or “a jerk.” A physician slipped up on her diet and gave in to the temptation to eat a donut Then she told herself that she was “a fat pig with no will power.” This thought was so upsetting that she ate six more donuts.</p>	<p>When you do well, you may think of yourself as special or as “a winner.” Motivational speakers, politicians, and athletic coaches often use this strategy to motivate people. But in reality, there’s no such thing as a “winner” or a “loser.” We’re all human beings, and no one can win or lose all the time.</p>
<p>10. Blame. You find fault with yourself (Self-Blame) or others (Other Blame).</p>	<p>Self-blame. If you’re depressed, you may beat up on yourself constantly and mercilessly, blaming yourself for every error and shortcoming instead of using your energy to find creative solutions to your problems.</p>	<p>Other-blame. During an argument, you may tell yourself that the other person is to blame for the conflict. Then you feel like an innocent victim and overlook your own role in the problem.</p>