



## Cognitive Distortions and the Evangelical Christian Parallels

A cognitive distortion is a biased or irrational way of thinking that causes people to perceive reality inaccurately. These mental patterns often lead to negative thoughts, self-defeating behavior, and emotional distress. Cognitive distortions can cause people to misinterpret events, relationships, or their own abilities, leading to distorted conclusions that don't reflect the true nature of a situation.

For example, someone might assume that a single mistake means they're a total failure (overgeneralization) or believe that if something goes wrong, it will lead to the worst possible outcome (catastrophizing). These patterns are common in conditions like anxiety and depression but can also affect anyone. Recognizing and challenging cognitive distortions can help people think more clearly and respond to situations in healthier, more balanced ways.

- 1. Filtering:** Mental filtering is draining and straining all positives in a situation and, instead, dwelling on its negatives. Even if there are more positive aspects than negative in a situation or person, you focus on the negatives exclusively.

### Example

It's performance review time at your company, and your manager compliments your hard work several times. In the end, they make one improvement suggestion. You leave the meeting feeling miserable and dwell on that one suggestion all day long.

### Evangelical Parallel

**Filtering:** Evangelical teachings that emphasize avoiding secular influences (e.g., media, certain relationships) may lead to filtering out anything that doesn't align with their beliefs, thus skewing a person's perception of reality by focusing only on confirming evidence.

- 2. Polarization or all-or-nothing thinking:** *Polarized* thinking is thinking about yourself and the world in an "all-or-nothing" way. When you engage in thoughts of black or white, with no shades of gray, this type of cognitive distortion is leading you.

### Example

Your coworker was a saint until she ate your sandwich. Now, you cannot stand her. Or, you got a B on your last test, so you have failed at being a good student despite getting only A's before that.

*All-or-nothing thinking* usually leads to extremely unrealistic standards for yourself and others that could affect your relationships and motivation. Black-or-white thoughts may also set you up for failure.

### Example

You've decided to eat healthy foods. But today, you didn't have time to prepare a meal, so you eat a bacon burger. This immediately leads you to conclude that you've ruined your healthy eating routine, so you decide to no longer even try.

When you engage in polarized thinking, everything is in "either/or" categories. This might make you miss the complexity of most people and situations.

## Evangelical Parallel

**Polarization (Black-and-White Thinking):** Evangelical doctrine often divides people and beliefs into stark categories—saved vs. unsaved, righteous vs. unrighteous, good vs. evil. This can encourage polarized thinking, where individuals struggle to see nuance or middle ground in complex matters of faith, morality, or human experience.

- 3. Overgeneralization:** When you overgeneralize something, you take an isolated negative event and turn it into a never-ending pattern of loss and defeat. With overgeneralization, words like "always," "never," "everything," and "nothing" are frequent in your train of thought.

### Example

You speak up at a team meeting, and your suggestions are not included in the project. You leave the meeting thinking, "I ruined my chances for a promotion. I *never* say the right thing!"

Overgeneralization can also manifest in your thoughts about the world and its events.

### Example

You're running late for work, and on your way there, you hit a red light. You think, "*Nothing* ever goes my way!"

## Evangelical Parallel

**Overgeneralization:** Doctrines that teach "all non-Christians are lost" or "the world is inherently sinful" can lead to overgeneralizing the behavior and worth of people outside the faith, reinforcing the belief that certain experiences or groups are uniformly negative or morally corrupt.

- 4. Discounting the positive:** Discounting positives is similar to mental filtering. The main difference is that you dismiss it as something of no value when you do think of positive aspects.

### Example

If someone compliments the way you look today, you think they're just being nice. If your boss tells you how comprehensive your report was, you discount it as something anyone else could do. If you do well in that job interview, you think it's because they didn't realize you're not that good.

## Evangelical Parallel

**Discounting the Positive:** In a theology that emphasizes human sinfulness, individuals may learn to focus on their shortcomings, even after achieving personal or spiritual growth. The belief in "total depravity" may foster a sense that any good they accomplish is insignificant or tainted by sin, discouraging the recognition of personal or communal accomplishments.

- 5. Jumping to conclusions:** When you jump to conclusions, you interpret an event or situation negatively without evidence supporting such a conclusion. Then, you react to your assumption.

### Example

Your partner comes home looking serious. Instead of asking how they are, you immediately assume they're mad at you. Consequently, you keep your distance. In reality, your partner had a bad day at work.

Jumping to conclusions or "mind-reading" is often in response to a persistent thought or concern of yours.

### Example

You feel insecure about your relationship. So, when you see your partner looking serious, you assume they might be losing interest in you.

## Evangelical Parallel

**Jumping to Conclusions:** Doctrines promoting spiritual warfare and demonic influence may encourage believers to see challenges or obstacles as having spiritual or satanic origins. This leads to conclusions about others' behaviors or events without evidence, such as labeling disagreements as attacks from the devil.

- 6. Catastrophizing:** Catastrophizing is related to jumping to conclusions. In this case, you jump to the worst possible conclusion in every scenario, no matter how improbable it is. This cognitive distortion often comes with “what if” questions. What if he didn't call because he got into an accident? What if she hasn't arrived because she really didn't want to spend time with me? What if I help this person and they end up betraying or abandoning me? Several questions might follow in response to one event.

### Example

What if my alarm doesn't go off? What if then I'm late for the important meeting? What if I get fired after I've worked so hard for this job?

## Evangelical Parallel

**Catastrophizing:** Evangelical teachings about end times (e.g., the Rapture, Armageddon) can sometimes encourage catastrophic thinking. The focus on looming judgment, punishment, and tribulation may create a heightened sense of fear and urgency, leading some believers to catastrophize both personal setbacks and societal challenges as signs of imminent destruction.

- 7. Personalization:** Personalization leads you to believe that you're responsible for events that, in reality, are completely or partially out of your control. This cognitive distortion often results in you feeling guilty or assigning blame without contemplating all factors involved.

### Example

Your child has an accident, and you blame yourself for allowing them to go to that party. You feel that if your partner had woken earlier, you would have been ready on time for work.

With personalizing, you also take things personally.

### Example

Your friend is talking about their personal beliefs regarding parenting, and you take their words as an attack against *your* parenting style.

## Evangelical Parallel

**Personalization:** The doctrine of individual salvation and responsibility can foster personalization, where believers feel solely responsible for converting others or saving them from hell. If someone doesn't respond positively to evangelism, the believer may internalize failure or feel guilt for that person's fate.

- 8. Control fallacies:** The word fallacy refers to an illusion, misconception, or error. Control fallacies can go two opposite ways: You either feel responsible or in control of everything in your and other people's lives, or you feel you have no control at all over anything in your life.

### Example

You couldn't complete a report that was due today. You immediately think, "Of course I couldn't complete it! My boss is overworking me, and everyone was so loud today at the office. Who can get anything done like that?"

In this example, you place all control of your behavior on someone else or an external circumstance. This is an external control fallacy. The other type of control fallacy is based on the belief that your actions and presence impact or control the lives of others.

### Example

You think you make someone else happy or unhappy. You think all of their emotions are controlled directly or indirectly by your behaviors.

## Evangelical Parallel

**Control Fallacies:** A belief in divine sovereignty, combined with free will, can create conflicting feelings of control. Believers may either feel they have no control (God's will is absolute) or overly responsible for outcomes (e.g., "I didn't pray enough, and that's why this bad thing happened").

- 9. Fallacy of fairness:** This cognitive distortion refers to measuring every behavior and situation on a scale of fairness. Finding that other people don't assign the same value of fairness to the event makes you resentful. In other words, you believe you know what's fair and what isn't, and it upsets you when other people disagree with you. The fallacy of fairness will lead you to face conflict with certain people and situations because you feel the need for everything to be "fair" according to your own parameters. But fairness is rarely absolute and can often be self-serving.

### Example

You expect your partner to come home and massage your feet. It's only "fair" since you spent all afternoon making them dinner. But they arrive exhausted and only want to take a bath. They believe it's "fair" to take a moment to relax from the day's chaos, so they can pay full attention to you and enjoy your dinner instead of being distracted and tired.

## Evangelical Parallel

### Fallacy of Fairness:

Evangelical teachings often emphasize the idea that believers will face persecution, which can distort perceptions of fairness. Some may expect hardship simply because of their faith, while others may see any adversity as unjust, leading to a dissonance between expectation and experience.

## 10. **Blaming:** Blaming refers to making others responsible for how you feel.

"You made me feel bad" is what usually defines this cognitive distortion. However, even when others engage in hurtful behaviors, you're still in control of how you feel in most situations. The distortion comes from believing that others have the power to affect your life, even more so than yourself.

### Example

Your partner comments on your new dress and you feel upset for the rest of the day. "You make me feel bad about myself," you tell them.

## Evangelical Parallel

**Blaming:** Some teachings may encourage individuals to attribute their suffering to demonic attacks, sin, or lack of faith, promoting an externalization of responsibility. This can lead to blaming external forces rather than examining personal or systemic factors that contribute to issues.

## 11. **Shoulds:** As cognitive distortions, "should" statements are subjective ironclad rules you set for yourself and others without considering the specifics of a circumstance. You tell yourself that things *should* be a certain way with no exceptions.

### Example

You think people should always be on time, or that someone who is independent should also be self-sufficient and never ask for help.

When it comes to yourself, you might believe you should always make your bed, or you should always make people laugh. "You should be better," you constantly tell yourself.

When these things don't happen — they really depend on many factors — you feel guilty, disappointed, let down, or frustrated. You may believe you're trying to motivate yourself with these statements, such as "I should go to the gym every day." However, when circumstances change, and you can't do what you *should*, you become angry and upset. You got out of work late and couldn't get to the gym, for example.

### **Evangelical Parallel**

**Shoulds:** Evangelical doctrine frequently promotes strict moral guidelines on how Christians should live (e.g., "You should pray daily," "You should abstain from certain behaviors"). This can lead to guilt, shame, and self-criticism when individuals fail to meet those standards or impose those same "shoulds" on others.

- 12. Emotional reasoning:** Emotional reasoning leads you to believe that the way you feel is a reflection of reality. "I feel this way about this situation, hence it must be a fact," defines this cognitive distortion.

#### **Example**

Feeling inadequate in a situation turns into, "I don't belong anywhere."

This cognitive distortion might also lead you to believe future events depend on how you feel.

#### **Example**

You may firmly believe something bad will happen today because you woke up feeling anxious.

You might also assess a random situation based on your emotional reaction. If someone says something that makes you angry, you immediately conclude that person is treating you poorly.

### **Evangelical Parallel**

**Emotional Reasoning:** The emphasis on personal spiritual experiences can lead to emotional reasoning, where feelings are equated with truth. For example, if someone feels distant from God, they may conclude that they have done something wrong, even if there is no objective reason.

- 13. Fallacy of change:** The fallacy of change has you expecting other people will change their ways to suit your expectations or needs, particularly when you pressure them enough.

### Example

You want your partner to focus only on you, despite knowing that they've always been very social and value time with friends.

So, every time they go out, you let them know it's not OK with you. Eventually, you *know* they will change their ways and want to stay home all the time.

### Evangelical Parallel

**Fallacy of Change:** Evangelical outreach often focuses on changing others, whether through evangelism or discipleship. This can foster unrealistic expectations that one can "fix" others through the right spiritual approach, even when personal change requires a more complex and internal process.

14. **Global labeling:** Labeling or mislabeling refers to taking a single attribute and turning it into an absolute. This happens when you judge and then define yourself or others based on an isolated event. The labels assigned are usually negative and extreme.

### Example

You see your new teammate applying makeup before a meeting, and you call them "shallow." Or, they don't submit a report on time, and you label them "useless."

This is an extreme form of overgeneralization that leads you to judge an action without taking the context into account. This, in turn, leads you to see yourself and others in ways that might not be accurate. Assigning labels to others can impact how you interact with them. This, in turn, could add friction to your relationships. When you assign those labels to yourself, it can hurt your self-esteem and confidence, leading you to feel insecure and anxious.

### Evangelical Parallel

**Global Labeling:** In some evangelical contexts, people may be labeled as "sinners," "backsliders," or "unbelievers" based on specific actions or beliefs. These broad labels can lead to a fixed view of others' worth or spiritual state, ignoring the complexity of individuals.

15. **Always being right:** This desire turns into a cognitive distortion when it trumps everything else, including evidence and other people's feelings. In this cognitive distortion, you see your own opinions as facts of life. This is why you will go to great lengths to prove you're right.



### **Example**

You quarrel with your sibling about how your parents haven't supported you enough. You're convinced this was the case all the time, while your sibling believes it varied according to the situation. Since your sibling doesn't feel the same way, you become angry and say things that rub your sibling the wrong way. You know they're getting upset, but you continue the argument to prove your point.

### **Evangelical Parallel**

**Always Being Right:** Doctrinal certainty can promote a sense of superiority in belief, where one's interpretation of scripture is seen as absolute truth. This reinforces the need to "always be right," leading to difficulty in accepting differing perspectives or criticisms.