Cognitive Distortions

Recognise thinking patterns without treating thoughts as facts

01 Explore rather than label

Thinking habits can narrow interpretations. A thought may contain a distortion, be partly accurate or reflect a real concern. Ask what went through the client’s mind before suggesting a label.

02 Six patterns to notice

All-or-nothing thinking: Seeing only extremes. Example: “If I make one mistake, I have failed.”

Overgeneralisation: Drawing a broad rule from one event. “That interview went badly; I never do well.”

Mental filter: Noticing a negative detail and missing others. “One critical comment ruined all the praise.”

Discounting positives: Explaining away evidence of success or strength. “They were only being polite.”

Jumping to conclusions: Assuming without enough evidence, including mind-reading or fortune-telling. “They look bored; they must dislike me.”

Catastrophising: Predicting an extreme outcome or inability to cope. “If I stumble, everything will collapse.”

Clinical tip

Keep the client’s own wording. Pattern names are prompts for curiosity, not verdicts.

More Patterns and a Pathway

Complete the ten-pattern reference set

03 Four more patterns

Emotional reasoning: Treating a feeling as proof. “I feel inadequate, so I must be.”

Should statements: Using rigid rules and demands. “I should never need help.”

Labelling: Defining a whole person by one event. “I made a mistake; I am useless.”

Personalisation or blame: Taking excessive responsibility. “They are quiet; I must have upset them.”

04 From thought to flexible perspective

1. Anchor: Identify the specific situation, not a general impression.
2. Capture: Write the thought in the client’s words; rate belief 0–100% if useful.
3. Explore: Ask what supports it, what does not, and what is missing.
4. Reconsider: Develop a fair alternative that acknowledges real difficulties.
5. Test and review: Choose a small experiment; revisit belief and emotion ratings.

Remember

A balanced thought is believable, not forced positivity.

Prompts and Practical Review

Worked example and session checklist

05 Questions for guided discovery

Notice: What did that moment mean to you? What feeling followed?

Evidence: What makes this seem true? Is there anything that points elsewhere?

Perspective: Could there be another explanation? What would you tell a friend?

Continuum: Is this really 0% or 100%, or is there a middle position?

Action: What could we observe or try to learn more?

06 Example: speaking up in a meeting

Situation: A colleague asks for my view during a team meeting.

Thought: “If I say something wrong, everyone will think I am incompetent.”

Possible pattern: Mind-reading and catastrophising are hypotheses, not verdicts.

Balanced response: “I might hesitate, but one comment cannot define my ability.”

Behavioural test: Share one prepared point; notice actual responses.

07 Before ending

☐ The client agrees with the wording.

☐ Emotions are validated.

☐ The alternative feels credible.

☐ The next step is specific.

☐ Review learning, not just whether anxiety fell.