

Cognitive Distortions Scenarios

1. Filtering: A person engaging in filter (or "mental filtering") takes the negative details and magnifies those details while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation.

Scenario:

Emma receives feedback on her quarterly performance review. Out of 10 comments, 8 are positive, highlighting her strong teamwork and initiative, but 2 mention areas for improvement, like meeting deadlines. Emma fixates only on the critical feedback, concluding that she's a failure.

Learning Activity:

- Have participants role-play as Emma's supportive colleague, helping her see the balanced perspective in the feedback.
 - Discuss how to use balanced thinking to address both strengths and areas for growth.
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2. Catastrophizing: When a person engages in catastrophizing, they expect disaster to strike, no matter what. In this distortion, a person hears about a problem and uses what if questions (e.g., "What if tragedy strikes?" "What if it happens to me?") to imagine the absolute worst occurring.

Scenario:

During a team presentation, Liam accidentally skips a slide. He immediately thinks, "I've ruined the entire presentation. Everyone must think I'm incompetent. I'll probably lose my job."

Learning Activity:

- Divide participants into small groups to rewrite Liam's inner dialogue using realistic and constructive language.
 - Encourage participants to identify the worst-case, best-case, and most-likely scenarios to challenge catastrophic thinking.
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3. Fallacy of Fairness: In the fallacy of fairness, a person feels resentful because they think that they know what is fair, but other people won't agree with them. People who go through life applying a measuring ruler against every situation judging its "fairness" will often feel

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resentful, angry, and even hopelessness because of it. Because life isn't fair – things will not always work out in a person's favor, even when they should.

Scenario:

Karen feels frustrated because she was passed over for a promotion despite working longer hours than her colleague, Mike. She believes it's "unfair" and dwells on how things should have gone differently, ignoring Mike's stronger qualifications for the role.

Learning Activity:

- Facilitate a debate exercise, where one group explains Karen's perspective and another explains the organization's rationale.
 - Discuss how focusing on personal responsibility and what can be controlled reduces frustration in such situations.
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4. Blaming: When a person engages in blaming, they hold other people responsible for their emotional pain.

Scenario:

James arrives late to an important meeting and blames traffic for his tardiness. However, he left his house later than usual and didn't account for the morning rush.

Learning Activity:

- Create a problem-solving activity where participants analyze James's situation and identify steps he could have taken to avoid being late.
 - Reflect on how accountability leads to better outcomes.
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5. Shoulds: Should statements appear as a list of ironclad rules about how every person should behave. People who break the rules make a person following these should statements angry.

Scenario:

Maria believes she "should" be perfect at every task assigned to her. When she struggles with a new software system, she criticizes herself for not being good enough and avoids asking for help because she feels it's something she "should" already know.

Learning Activity:

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- Conduct a reframing exercise, where participants replace Maria's rigid "should" statements with flexible, empowering alternatives (e.g., "It's okay to learn as I go").
 - Discuss the impact of self-compassion on learning and growth.
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6. Always Being Right: When a person engages in this distortion, they are continually putting other people on trial to prove that their own opinions and actions are absolutely the correct ones. To a person engaging in "always being right," being wrong is unthinkable – they will go to any length to demonstrate their rightness. Being right often is more important than the feelings of others around a person who engages in this cognitive distortion, even loved ones.

Scenario:

During a strategy meeting, Ethan insists his approach to a project is the only viable option. Even when teammates suggest valid alternatives, he dismisses their ideas to maintain his position.

Learning Activity:

- Simulate a team meeting where participants must practice listening to differing perspectives and acknowledging when others might be right.
 - Introduce the concept of collaborative decision-making to reduce the need to always "win" arguments.
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These scenarios help participants recognize and address cognitive distortions in relatable situations, improving both self-awareness and interpersonal skills.

6 Conflict Types: Examples/Scenarios

1. Interpersonal Conflict: Personality Clash Between Team Members

Scenario: Sarah and Jake work on the same project team but have clashing communication styles. Sarah prefers direct, concise communication, while Jake values more detailed discussions. Their misalignment has led to frustration, with Sarah feeling that Jake overcomplicates things and Jake believing Sarah is dismissive of his input.

Training Exercise:

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- Have participants **role-play a mediation session**, where a manager helps them recognize their different styles and find common ground.
- Discuss **active listening strategies** and ways to adapt communication styles for better collaboration.

2. Misaligned Priorities Between Departments

Scenario:

Within a federal agency, the **Public Affairs Office** and the **Policy & Implementation Team** are in conflict over communication priorities.

- The **Public Affairs Office** wants to take more time refining public messaging to ensure accuracy, clarity, and alignment with agency branding before releasing new policy updates.
- The **Policy & Implementation Team** is under pressure to roll out a new public program quickly and believes delays in communication are slowing down implementation and causing public confusion.

The tension between these teams has led to **delays in public outreach**, frustration on both sides, and mixed messages being released to stakeholders.

Training Exercise:

- **Step 1: Role-Playing Department Perspectives**
 - Break participants into two groups, one representing the **Public Affairs Office** and the other representing the **Policy & Implementation Team**.
 - Each group must **define their priorities, challenges, and justifications** for their approach.
- **Step 2: Structured Negotiation**
 - Facilitate a discussion where both teams present their perspectives.
 - Encourage them to **listen actively, identify areas of compromise, and develop a joint solution** that balances clear, accurate messaging with the need for timely communication.
- **Step 3: Developing a Collaborative Solution**
 - Guide teams to create a **realistic action plan**, such as:

- Establishing **pre-approved messaging templates** to speed up communication.
 - Creating a **real-time review process** that allows for quick fact-checking.
 - Designating a **liaison** from each team to improve collaboration and prevent delays.
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3. Values Conflict: Ethical Dilemma in Decision-Making

Scenario: A senior manager, Alex, asks an employee, Lisa, to tweak performance data slightly to make the company's quarterly figures look better. Lisa is uncomfortable, feeling it is dishonest, but Alex insists it's a "common industry practice."

Training Exercise:

- Conduct a **guided discussion** on ethical decision-making and company values.
 - Ask participants to role-play Lisa's response, exploring different ways to address the situation while maintaining integrity.
 - Review strategies for **asserting ethical boundaries** in a professional manner.
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4. Limited Resources Conflict: Budget Cuts & Team Competition

Scenario: Two departments are competing for a limited budget allocation. The IT team needs funding to upgrade security systems, while the HR team is requesting funds for employee development programs. Leadership has asked them to justify their requests, but both believe their needs are more urgent.

Training Exercise:

- Have participants act as IT and HR representatives, **presenting their cases** for why they should receive the funding.
 - Conduct a **facilitated negotiation**, encouraging compromise, shared resources, or alternative funding solutions.
 - Discuss how to handle **scarce resources without creating a "win-lose" dynamic**.
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5. Poor Performance Conflict: Managing Underperformance

Scenario: Tom, a longtime employee, has been struggling with meeting deadlines and delivering quality work. His manager, Maria, has given feedback, but Tom is defensive, blaming unclear expectations and workload pressure.

Training Exercise:

- Have one participant play Maria (the manager) and another play Tom (the employee).
- Conduct a **difficult conversation role-play**, where Maria provides **constructive feedback using a coaching approach** rather than a punitive one.
- Discuss best practices for **setting clear expectations, offering support, and holding employees accountable**.

6. Power Struggle Conflict: Leadership Tension Between Two Managers

Scenario: Two department heads, Olivia and Mark, are constantly undermining each other. Olivia believes Mark is overstepping into her team's responsibilities, while Mark argues that Olivia is making decisions without consulting him. Their teams are caught in the middle, leading to confusion and inefficiency.

Training Exercise:

- Conduct a **leadership mediation exercise**, where Olivia and Mark must **identify areas of overlap** and agree on boundaries.
- Discuss how **power struggles impact team morale and productivity**.
- Encourage the use of **collaborative leadership** rather than competitive leadership.