Cognitive Distortions

A Quick Guide to Recognizing and Repairing Distorted Thinking

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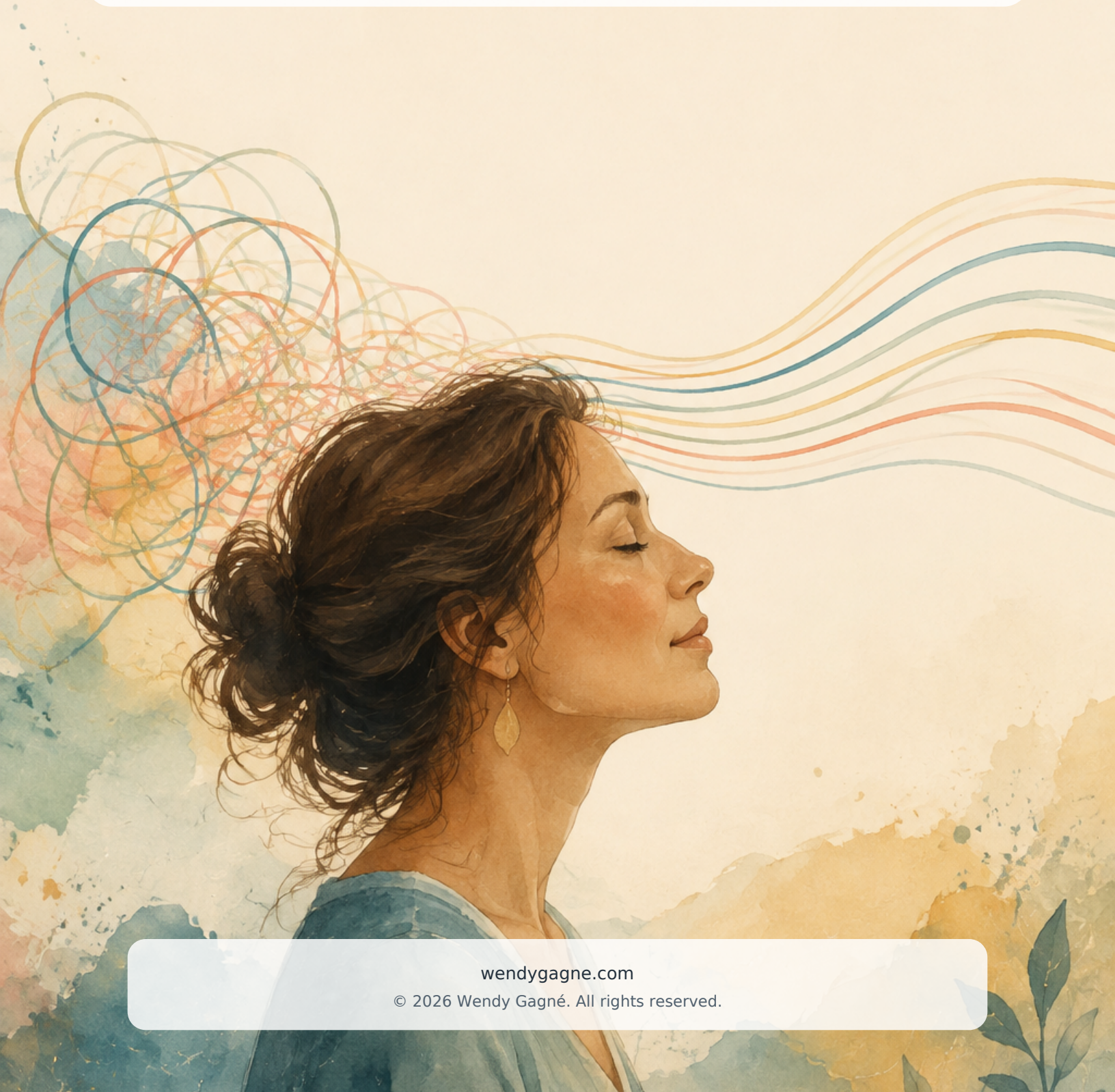

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Cognitive Distortions

A quick guide to noticing thoughts that can bend our view of a problem - and answering them more fairly.

All-or-nothing thinking

TYPICAL THOUGHT	QUICK REALITY CHECK
“If it isn't perfect, it's a failure.”	Look for the middle ground, partial success, or what was learned.

Overgeneralizing

TYPICAL THOUGHT	QUICK REALITY CHECK
“This always happens. Nothing ever works.”	Ask whether this is one event or a genuinely consistent pattern.

Mental filter

TYPICAL THOUGHT	QUICK REALITY CHECK
“One thing went wrong, so the whole experience was awful.”	Deliberately include the neutral and positive facts being filtered out.

Discounting the positive

TYPICAL THOUGHT	QUICK REALITY CHECK
“That success doesn't count; I was just lucky.”	Give positive evidence the same weight you give mistakes.

Mind reading

TYPICAL THOUGHT	QUICK REALITY CHECK
“I know they think badly of me.”	Separate what you know from what you assume; seek clarification when appropriate.

Fortune telling

TYPICAL THOUGHT	QUICK REALITY CHECK
“I already know this will go badly.”	List several possible outcomes, including the most probable one.

More Common Thinking Traps

Catastrophizing

TYPICAL THOUGHT	QUICK REALITY CHECK
“This will be unbearable - a complete disaster.”	Estimate what is most likely and identify how you could cope.

Emotional reasoning

TYPICAL THOUGHT	QUICK REALITY CHECK
“I feel afraid, so I must be in danger.”	Treat the feeling as important information, but not automatic proof.

'Should' statements

TYPICAL THOUGHT	QUICK REALITY CHECK
“I should never struggle or make mistakes.”	Replace rigid demands with realistic preferences and humane expectations.

Labeling

TYPICAL THOUGHT	QUICK REALITY CHECK
“I failed, so I am a failure.”	Describe the specific action or event without defining your whole identity.

Personalizing

TYPICAL THOUGHT	QUICK REALITY CHECK
“Their bad mood must be because of me.”	Consider other influences and distinguish responsibility from possibility.

Magnifying / minimizing

TYPICAL THOUGHT	QUICK REALITY CHECK
“My mistake is enormous; my strengths are nothing.”	Use the same fair scale when judging difficulties, strengths, and successes.

How Distortions Affect Perspective

- Cognitive distortions can make a problem appear larger, more permanent, more personal, or more hopeless than the available evidence supports.
- They narrow perspective by filtering out alternative explanations, personal strengths, contradictory evidence, and possible solutions.
- Emotional reactions may then fit the distorted interpretation rather than the full situation, intensifying anxiety, anger, shame, or helplessness.

A Simple Repair Process

- Notice: Pause and write down the thought as accurately as possible.
- Name: Identify the thinking pattern without criticizing yourself for having it.
- Check: Separate observable facts from assumptions, predictions, and emotional conclusions.
- Broaden: Ask what evidence does not fit the thought and what other explanation may be possible.
- Reframe: Replace the distortion with a balanced and believable statement - not forced positivity, but a fuller account of reality.

References

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This handout provides general educational information and is not a diagnosis or a substitute for individualized mental-health care.