

Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions are the tools of the pathological critic, the means by which the critic operates, the weapons that the critic brings to bear against your self-esteem. If irrational beliefs can be said to be the pathological critic's *ideology* (a thesis explored in a later chapter), then cognitive distortions can be considered the critic's *methodology*. The critic uses distortions the way a terrorist uses bombs and guns.

Cognitive distortions are actually bad habits—habits of thought that you consistently use to interpret reality in an unreal way. For example, when a colleague declines to be on a committee you are chairing, you can take his refusal as the simple decision it is. Or you can employ your habit of thinking about any type of rejection as a personal insult, and thus take another swipe at your beleaguered self-esteem.

Distortions are a matter of style. They may be based on deeply held unrealistic beliefs, but the distortions are not beliefs themselves—they are habits of thinking that get you into trouble.

Distorted thinking styles are hard to diagnose and treat because they are bound up tightly with your way of perceiving reality. Even the sanest, most rational person on earth operates at some distance from reality. It's unavoidable, given the built-in programming of the human mind and senses.

One way of thinking about this is to say that everyone looks at himself or herself through a telescope. If your telescope is right-way-round and in good repair, you see yourself looming relatively large and important in the universe, clearly focused, and with your various

parts in correct proportion. Unfortunately, few people have perfect telescopes. The telescope can be wrong-way-round, so that they see themselves small and diminished. The lenses can be smudged, lopsided, chipped, or out of focus. Obstructions in the tube can block your view of certain aspects of yourself. Some people have kaleidoscopes instead of telescopes. Others can't see at all, because they've pasted pictures of a false self over the lens of their telescope.

Distorted thinking styles cut you off from reality in several ways. Distortions are judgmental; they automatically apply labels to people and events before you get a chance to evaluate them. Distortions also tend to be inaccurate and imprecise. They are invariably general in scope and application, failing to take special circumstances and characteristics into account. They allow you to see only one side of a question, giving an unbalanced view of the world. And finally, distortions are based on emotional rather than rational processes.

This chapter will discuss the nine most common cognitive distortions that affect self-esteem. It will teach you how to recognize them and develop effective rebuttal techniques to pierce through the veil of distortion and deal with reality in a more balanced, accurate, self-compassionate way.

The Distortions

1. Overgeneralization

Cognitive distortions change the very nature of the universe you live in. Overgeneralizations create a shrinking universe in which more and more absolute laws make life more and more confining. It is a universe in which the scientific method is turned upside down. Instead of observing all available data, formulating a law that explains all of the data, and then testing the law, you take one fact or event, make a general rule out of it, and never test the rule.

For example, a chief accountant named George asked a bookkeeper in his department to go to dinner with him. She declined, saying she never went out with the boss. George concluded that none of the women in his department would ever want to go out with him. From one rejection he overgeneralized and made it a rule never to ask again.

If you overgeneralize, one faux pas means that you're a social incompetent. One unsuccessful date with an older woman means that all older women will find you shallow and inexperienced. One wobbly table means that you'll never master furniture making. One acci-

dentally deleted file means that you're a computer illiterate. And your habit of overgeneralizing doesn't let you test these rules.

You can tell that you're overgeneralizing when your pathological critic uses these key words: *never, always, all, every, none, no one, nobody, everyone, everybody*. The critic uses absolutes to close the doors of possibility, blocking your access to change and growth: "I *always* screw up." "I *never* get to work on time." "Nobody really cares for me." "Everybody thinks I'm awkward."

2. Global Labeling

Global labeling is the application of stereotyped labels to whole classes of people, things, behaviors, and experiences. People who practice global labeling live in a universe populated by stock characters who act out unrealistic melodramas. Global labelers with low self-esteem often cast themselves in the role of the villain or the sim-pleton.

This thinking style is closely allied with overgeneralization, but the distortion takes the form of a label instead of a rule. Global labeling is even more deadly in the way it creates stereotypes and cuts you off from the true variety of life. For example, an aspiring writer was working in a warehouse and writing at night. He had a touch of asthma and a slight limp. He had labels for everything: The warehouse owner was a Capitalistic Slime. Editors who rejected his short stories were part of the Literary Establishment. His job was a Treadmill. His writing was Neurotic Scribbling. He himself was a Wheezing Gimp. He thought he suffered from an Inferiority Complex. His favorite words were all pejorative ones. He had a million slogans, and they were all clichés of loss and dissatisfaction. With so many labels pasted on his life, he was too bound into the status quo to change any part of it.

You should suspect yourself of global labeling if the messages from your critic are pejorative clichés about your appearance, performance, intelligence, relationships, and so on. "My love affair is a hopeless tangle." "I'm just a failure." "My house is a pigsty." "My degree is a worthless piece of paper." "I'm neurotic." "I'm stupid." "I'm a spineless jellyfish, a quitter." "All my efforts to improve are futile grasping at straws."

3. Filtering

When you filter reality, you see your universe as through a glass darkly. You can see and hear only certain things. Like a voice-

activated tape recorder, your attention is awakened only by particular kinds of stimuli: examples of loss, rejection, unfairness, and so on. You selectively abstract certain facts from reality and pay attention to them, ignoring all the rest. You have blind spots that obscure evidence of your own worth. Filtering makes you a particularly bad reporter of your life experience. Your own accounts of your experience are as biased as political journalism in a banana republic. Filtering is as dangerous to your self-esteem as driving a car with all the windows painted black would be to your physical well-being.

An example of filtering is Ray and Kay's intimate dinner at home. Kay praises Ray's choice of wine and the flowers he bought. She compliments him on grilling the steaks to perfection and for picking out the sweetest corn on the cob. Then she suggests that next time he might put a little less salt in the salad dressing. Ray suddenly feels let down and incompetent because Kay doesn't like his salad dressing. He can't console himself by recalling her several compliments because he literally didn't hear them—he was too busy filtering the conversation for its critical content.

You should suspect filtering when your pathological critic returns again and again to certain themes or key words: *loss, gone, burnt, dangerous, unfair, stupid*. Examine your memories of social events or conversations to see whether you remember all of what happened or was said. If out of a three-hour dinner party you can only clearly recall the fifteen minutes when you spilled your wine and felt mortified, then you are probably filtering your experiences for evidence of unworth.

The negative things about yourself that you focus on become the leitmotifs in the symphony of your life. You listen for them so hard that you lose track of the larger, more important melodies and movements. It's like the piccolo player who never heard the cannons in the 1812 *Overture*.

4. Polarized Thinking

If you habitually indulge in polarized thinking, you live in a black-and-white universe, with no colors or shades of gray. You divide all your actions and experiences into either/or dichotomies, according to absolute standards. You judge yourself as either a saint or a sinner, a good guy or a bad guy, a success or a failure, a hero or a villain, a noble or a bastard.

For example, Anne was clerk in a fabric store. She sometimes drank a little too much at parties. One Monday she stayed home from work with a hangover. She was severely depressed about this inci-

dent for a week because she tended to judge people as either sober citizens or alcoholics. By falling off the wagon once, she became, in her own eyes, a bottomed-out drunk.

The trouble with polarized thinking is that you inevitably end up on the negative side of the equation. No one can be perfect all the time, so at the first mistake, you must conclude that you are all bad. This "one strike and you're out" style of thinking is death to self-esteem.

You can catch yourself doing polarized thinking by listening for "either/or" messages from your pathological critic. "I'm either going to win the scholarship or completely blow my future." "If you can't be funny and 'on' then you're a bore." "If I can't be calm I'm hysterical." Sometimes only one half of the dichotomy is stated, and the other half is implied: "There's only one right way to live (and all the others are wrong)." "This is my big chance for a good relationship (and if I blow it, I'll be alone)."

5. Self-Blame

Self-blame is a distorted thinking style that has you blaming yourself for everything, whether you are actually at fault or not. In the self-blaming cosmos, you are at the center of a universe of bad things, and they're all your fault.

You blame yourself for all your shortcomings, for being coarse, fat, lazy, scatterbrained, incompetent, or whatever. You blame yourself for things that are only marginally under your control, such as your bad health or how others react to you. If self-blame is a firmly ingrained habit, you may even find yourself feeling responsible for things that are obviously out of your control, like the weather, plane schedules, or your spouse's feelings. It's good to take responsibility for your life, but in a case of serious self-blame, you see yourself as pathologically responsible.

The most common, observable symptom of self-blame is incessant apologizing. Your hostess burns the roast, and you apologize. Your spouse doesn't want to see the movie you prefer, so you apologize. The clerk at the post office says you don't have enough postage and you say, "God, I'm so stupid, I'm sorry."

Self-blame blinds you to your good qualities and accomplishments. One man had three sons who grew up to become a dedicated social worker, a talented chemist, and a drug addict. The father poisoned his later years by brooding over the ways he had failed his third son. He discounted any influence he may have had over the lives of his other, more successful sons.

6. Personalization

In a personalized universe, you are the universe. Every atom in it is somehow related to you. All events, properly decoded, seem to have something to do with you. Unfortunately, there is very little sense of power or of being in control of events. It feels more like you are under pressure, under siege, or under observation by everyone around you.

Personalization has a narcissistic component. You enter a crowded room and immediately begin comparing yourself to everybody else—who is smarter, better looking, more competent, more popular, and so on. Your roommate complains about how cramped the apartment is, and you immediately assume that she means that you have too much stuff. A friend says that he's bored and you think he means that he's bored with you.

The big drawback to personalization is that it makes you react inappropriately. You might start a fight with your roommate over a nonexistent issue. You may try to be less boring by cracking tasteless jokes, and thus become really boring. Inappropriate responses like these can alienate those around you. Their hostility or disapproval, imagined at first, can actually become real, fueling another round of distorted interactions.

It's difficult to catch yourself indulging in personalization. One way is to pay close attention when someone is complaining to you. For example, if someone at work were complaining about people not returning tools and supplies to their proper place, what would your reaction be? Would you automatically assume that the person was complaining about you? Would you automatically assume that the person wanted you to do something about the problem? Then you might be personalizing. You might be automatically relating the complaint to yourself and never have it cross your mind that the person was just blowing off steam and that it had nothing to do with you personally. Another way to catch yourself is trying to notice when you are comparing yourself negatively to others, concluding that you are less smart, attractive, competent, and so on.

7. Mind Reading

Mind reading is a distorted thinking style which assumes that everyone in the universe is just like you. This is an easy mistake to make, since it's based on the phenomenon of projection—you assume that others feel the way you do, basing your assumption on a belief in a commonality of human nature and experience that may or may not actually exist.

Mind reading is fatal to self-esteem because you are especially liable to think that everyone agrees with your negative opinions of yourself: "I'm boring her. She can tell I'm really a dull guy trying to fake it." "He's quiet because I was late and he's angry about it." "He is watching my every move for the slightest mistake. He wants to fire me."

Mind reading leads to tragic miscalculations in your relationships. Harry was an electrician who often assumed that his wife, Marie, was angry with him when she bustled about the apartment with a frown on her face. He handled this supposed rejection by becoming very terse and withdrawn. In fact, Marie frowned when she was having menstrual cramps, when she was rushed, and when she felt worried about finances. But Harry's withdrawal made it hard for her to tell Harry why she was frowning. She interpreted his withdrawal as lack of interest, and kept quiet. Harry's initial mind reading destroyed the chance for any real communication.

When you're mind reading, your perception *seems* right, so you proceed as if it *were* right. You don't check out your interpretations with others because there seems to be no doubt. You can tell you're mind reading by listening closely to what you say when pressed, when asked why you made an assumption: "I just had a strong hunch." "I can just tell." "I just know." "It's my intuition." "I'm sensitive to these things." These kinds of statements show that you are leaping to conclusions without any real evidence.

8. Control Fallacies

Control fallacies either put you in charge of the whole universe or put everyone but you in charge.

The distorted thinking style of overcontrol gives you a false feeling of omnipotence. You struggle to control every aspect of every situation. You hold yourself responsible for the behavior of every guest at your party, for your child's grades in school, for your paper-boy's punctuality, for your mother's coping with menopause, and for the outcome of your United Way campaign. When guests put their feet on the furniture, when your child flunks algebra, when the newspaper is late, when your mother calls you up in tears, or when your motion is voted down at the committee meeting, you feel a loss of control. You may experience resentment, anger, and a keen sense of personal failure that erodes your self-esteem.

You should suspect your pathological critic of using the fallacy of overcontrol when you think things like "I've got to make them listen," "She has to say yes," "I'll make sure he arrives on time" in

situations where you are not really in control. You should suspect that overcontrol is the problem if you feel a keen sense of personal failure when someone close to you fails.

The distorted thinking style of undercontrol takes control away from you. You put yourself on the fringes of every situation, unable to influence others. You feel that the outcomes of events are out of your hands most of the time. Molly was a receptionist for the phone company who frequently fell into this fallacy. Her habit of thinking that she could do nothing about her life usurped her power and cast her in the role of perennial victim. She was in trouble with her boss for coming in late too often, her bank account was overdrawn, and her boyfriend had stopped calling her. When she thought about her situation, she felt helpless. It seemed that her boss, the bank, and her boyfriend were all ganging up on her. Her pathological critic kept saying things like, "You're weak, you're helpless. There's nothing you can do." She was literally unable to make plans for getting up earlier, refinancing her debts, or calling up and confronting her boyfriend.

Of the two control fallacies, undercontrol is the worst for your self-esteem. Abdication of power has its cost in a feeling of helplessness, a bleak sense of hopelessness, feeble resentment, and numbing depression.

9. Emotional Reasoning

An emotional universe is chaotic, governed by changeable feelings instead of rational laws. The distortion in this thinking style is to avoid or discount your thinking all together. You rely instead on emotions to interpret reality and direction action.

Susie was a fashion designer who lived on an emotional roller-coaster. She'd feel happy one day, so she figured her life was going well. The next day she might be sad, and if you asked her, she'd tell you how her life was a tragedy. Next week she'd be a bit nervous and be convinced that her life was dangerous in some way. The actual facts of her existence didn't change much from day to day. Only her emotions changed.

The implication for self-esteem is disastrous: You *feel* useless, so you must *be* useless. You *feel* unworthy, so you must *be* unworthy. You *feel* ugly, so you *are* ugly. You are what you feel.

Here's how the pathological critic uses emotions as weapons: He whispers in your mental ear, "Weak, spineless." This faint thought triggers the emotion of depression. You feel helpless and stuck. Then the critic pipes up again with a devious piece of circular

reasoning: "You are what you feel. You feel helpless, so you are helpless." By this time, you've forgotten that the critic started the whole vicious circle. You fall for a circular argument that you would dismiss out of hand if you read it in a book.

The real error in emotional reasoning lies in tuning out those first thoughts introduced by your pathological critic, the thoughts that cause your painful emotions in the first place. The way to correct the error is to tune back into your self-talk and notice how it distorts reality to trigger negative emotions.

Combating Distortions

The most important single skill to master is vigilance. You must constantly listen to what you're telling yourself. You must not give in to depression, but persevere in analyzing the thoughts that arouse your painful emotions.

It helps to remember that low self-esteem involves some short-term gains. When you begin to thwart the pathological critic and refute the distorted thinking styles that are his weapons, you are cutting yourself off from these short-term gains. You're taking a chance. You're betting your current discomfort against future gain. This risk will feel scary at times, boring at others. The process will seem hopeless, or just like too much trouble. You will come up with a series of rationalizations for why it won't work, why it isn't working, and how silly the whole thing is anyway. These are the death struggles of the pathological critic.

Combating distorted thinking involves a commitment. You must commit yourself to being constantly on guard, even when you don't feel like it. This commitment is more important than your commitment to your family, your friends, or your ideals, because it is a commitment to *yourself*.

The Three-Column Technique

This technique for rebutting cognitive distortions is as simple as the commitment to use the technique is difficult. At first, write all your responses down on paper. Later, when this technique becomes a habit, you may be able to do it in your head.

When you're in a situation that makes you feel depressed or discouraged, when your opinion of yourself is low, take time out to get a pencil and a piece of paper. Make three columns like this:

Self-statement

Distortion

Rebuttal

In the first column, write down what your pathological critic is saying to you about the situation. Even if nothing immediately comes to mind, keep reliving the situation until you get a word or two. Your self-statements may be extremely fast or condensed, so that you will have to slow them down and write them out in full.

Then examine your self-statements for the distortions that murder your self-esteem. Here is a summary of the nine most common distortions for your quick reference:

1. *Overgeneralization.* From one isolated event you make a general, universal rule. If you failed once, you'll always fail.
2. *Global labeling.* You automatically use pejorative labels to describe yourself, rather than accurately describing your qualities.
3. *Filtering.* You selectively pay attention to the negative and disregard the positive.
4. *Polarized thinking.* You lump things into absolute, black-and-white categories, with no middle ground. You have to be perfect or you're worthless.
5. *Self-blame.* You consistently blame yourself for things that may not really be your fault.
6. *Personalization.* You assume that everything has something to do with you, and you negatively compare yourself to everyone else.
7. *Mind reading.* You assume that others don't like you, are angry with you, don't care about you, and so on, without any real evidence that your assumptions are correct.
8. *Control fallacies.* You either feel that you have total responsibility for everybody and everything, or feel that you have no control, that you're a helpless victim.
9. *Emotional reasoning.* You assume that things are the way you feel about them.

In the last column, write rebuttals to your self-statements, specifically attacking each distortion in turn.

Example. Joan had trouble joining in at work. Others would gather in the employee's lounge for coffee and go out to lunch together. Joan stayed at her desk or took walks alone at lunch time. She liked and admired many of her co-workers, but felt awkward about joining them. One day at lunch she stayed at her desk and tried the three-column technique. This is what she wrote:

| <i>Self-statements</i> | <i>Distortions</i> | <i>Rebuttal</i> |
|--|------------------------------------|--|
| They'll reject me. They'll see how nervous and awkward I am. They already think I'm weird. I'll be tongue-tied, nothing to say. I'm always like that. | Mind reading Overgeneralization | I have no way of knowing what they'll think. That's up to them. Not so! Sometimes I'm quite articulate. |
| I'm such a dud. | Global labeling | No, I'm not a dud. I'm just quiet. |
| They'll all be looking at me, at my weird clothes that don't fit, my dishrag hair. | Mind reading | They couldn't care how I look. That's all in my head. |
| It's hopeless. There's nothing I can do about it. | Control fallacy | Nothing is ever totally hopeless. Enough defeatism. |

Creating Your Rebuttal Voice

After making a commitment, the next hardest task facing you is to develop effective rebuttals to your self-statements. It will help greatly to imagine a person as your rebuttal voice—someone else who can stand up to your pathological critic when you're down. This person becomes the champion of your cause, your advisor, your teacher or coach. Here are some suggestions.

Healthy Coach. If you are athletically inclined, you might like the idea of a healthy coach. This is the person of experience who is committed to helping you win. He or she gives you pointers and pep talks, sets up a regimen of healthy things to do each day, and keeps you fit and motivated.

Accepting Friend. This is a friend who has known you for years and accepts all your quirks and failings. There's nothing you can't say to this friend and nothing your friend says can hurt you. This friend is totally on your side, ready with understanding, and able to remind you of your good points when you forget them yourself.

Assertive Agent. Picture a Hollywood or Broadway agent who is totally dedicated to you. He or she is out there shouting your praises from dawn to dark. Your agent thinks that you're the greatest, you can do anything, you're going right to the top, you can't fail. Your agent is a shoulder to cry on, a reservoir of confidence.

Rational Teacher. This is the stern but kind, rational but warm teacher who lives only so that you may learn. He or she points out opportunities to learn and grow. Your teacher's comments are always factual and insightful, enlightening you and showing you how the world works and how you work in it.

Compassionate Mentor. This is an older, wiser person who has chosen to guide you in your development as a whole and healthy human being. This mentor has seen everything, lived through everything, and is an invaluable source of good advice. The chief characteristic of your mentor is a deep and abiding compassion for you and all living things. You are totally safe with your mentor.

You can choose one of these personae for your rebuttal voice or make up a voice based on somebody you know, read about, or saw in a movie. It could be a priest or rabbi, an admired movie actor, or even an alien from another galaxy—whoever you feel safe with, whoever will help. You can even imagine an entourage of these people who go everywhere with you, speaking up to give advice and support as needed.

When you rebut your pathological critic, hear your imaginary support person speaking to you in the second person, addressing you by name: "No, John, you're not weird. You have a vivid imagination and a unique way of looking at things. You have a right to your own point of view and your own feelings." Then paraphrase the statement in your mind, using the first person and changing the words to make them stronger and drive the point home: "That's right, I'm not weird. I have a vivid imagination. I have my own slant on things, and that's a valuable trait. I have a right to be different if I feel like it, and I refuse to call myself names anymore."

Rules for Rebuttal

But what should these rebuttal voices say? How do you refute distortions like mind reading or emotional reasoning that seem so right, so unassailable?

In composing an effective rebuttal to a distorted self-statement, there are four rules to take into consideration.

1. *Rebuttals must be strong.* Imagine your rebuttals spoken in a loud, forceful voice. If you invent a coach or trainer or mentor to be your rebuttal voice, make that person strong and forceful. Your pathological critic is powerful, with years of experience in delivering devastating messages to you. You need to counter with equal or greater force. Try beginning your rebuttals with a loud mental exclamation that will shock your critic into silence: "NO!" or "SHUT UP!

or "LIAR!" See "The Howitzer Mantras" in chapter three for more suggested retorts of this kind. You might even do something physical to interrupt your negative train of thought—snap your fingers or pinch yourself.

2. *Rebuttals must be nonjudgmental.* This means that if you have been indulging in global labeling, all those pejorative adjectives and adverbs—"awful, disgusting, horrible"—have got to go. Get rid of notions of right and wrong. Concentrate on what is, not what should be. You are not "stupid," you merely got a C in sociology. You are not "selfish," you just wanted some time for yourself.

Being very exact in your statements, rather than exaggerating or minimizing, will help remove the judgmental quality from your self-statements. You are not fat, you weigh 198 pounds. Your blood pressure is not astronomical, it is 180 over 90. You are not a boob at parties, you just don't like to talk to strangers unless they speak first.

3. *Rebuttals must be specific.* Think in terms of specific behavior or a specific problem. If your self-statement is "Everything I do turns out wrong," make it specific: "Only three out of the eight people I invited came to my party." Instead of saying, "Nobody will ever love me again," say, "At this moment, I am not in a relationship." You are not without friends, you have three people you can call up if you want to. Your date wasn't cold and rejecting, he just said that he was tired and wanted to make it an early night.

Constantly ask yourself, "What are the facts? What would stand up in court? What do I know for sure?" This is the only way to find mind reading and emotional reasoning. If you feel that your boss disapproves of you, examine the facts: all you really know is that he didn't say anything about the memo you sent him and that he blinks a lot when he looks at you. Beyond that, it's all fantasy.

4. *Rebuttals must be balanced.* Include the positive as well as the negative. "Five people didn't come to my party, but three people did come and had a good time." "I'm not in a relationship right now, but I have been in the past and will be in the future." "I weigh 198 pounds, but I have a kind heart." "I'm not the best-looking guy in my class, but I know I'll achieve something in life."

When you use these rules to compose your own rebuttals, write them out on paper using the three-column technique. You will probably have a long paragraph of analysis, refutations, and positive statements to rebut each negative self-statement. When you are finished, underline or star the parts of your rebuttal that seem the strongest. These stronger statements are the ones you should memorize and use the next time your pathological critic starts attacking you.

Rebuttals

At the beginning, you can use the rebuttals suggested in this section word for word. Later you will find that the rebuttals you compose yourself will be the most effective.

1. Overgeneralization. To fight overgeneralizations, first get rid of absolute terms such as *all, every, none, nobody, everybody, never, always*, and so on. Pay special attention to the rules about being specific and balanced. Finally, avoid statements about the future—you have no way of predicting the future. Here are some examples:

- What evidence have I got for that conclusion?
- Do I really have enough data to make a rule?
- What other conclusion could this evidence support? What else could it mean?
- How can I check this conclusion?
- No absolutes—quantify exactly.
- I can't predict the future.

Here's an example of how a plumber named Harold fought against some powerful negative self-statements. He habitually told himself, via his pathological critic:

- Nobody likes me.
- Nobody ever invites me anywhere.
- Everybody looks down on me.
- I'm just a dumb plumber.
- I haven't got a friend in the whole world.
- I'll never have any friends.

The first thing that Harold noticed after writing down these self-statements was the number of absolutes: "Nobody . . . anywhere . . . everybody . . . whole world . . . never." He asked himself, "What evidence do I have for these absolute conclusions?" He found he could be more accurate and take the sting out of the statements by substituting less general words: "Few people . . . some places . . . some people . . . few friends . . ."

Harold applied the rule about being specific by listing the people he felt looked down on him, and those he wished would include him in social functions. He applied the balance rule by listing people who did like him and spent time with him. He made his rebuttal strong by prefacing it with "Stop it!" shouted loudly in his mind.

Finally, Harold deleted the judgmental label "dumb plumber," balanced it with his good points, and warned himself against predicting the future. Here is Harold's full rebuttal:

- Stop it! *
- What evidence do I have for these absolute conclusions?
- I haven't met everybody in the world.
- I haven't been everywhere in the world.
- Some people like Bob seem to dislike me.
- But others like Gordon like me a lot.
- Ralph and Sally didn't invite me to their picnic.
- But my Dad, Molly, and Mr. Henderson often invite me over.
- So I do have some friends. *
- I probably will have friends in the future.
- So stop it! Stop predicting loneliness.
- I'm a *good* plumber.*
- Plumbing is a respectable trade.

The statements marked with an asterisk are the parts of the rebuttal that Harold found most powerful. These are the parts that he memorized and remembered to use whenever his pathological critic started telling him that he was "friendless" and "dumb."

2. Global labeling. When you write your negative self-statements down on paper, look for nouns, adjectives, and verbs that are judgmental global labels. Look for nouns such as slob, failure, bum, ingrate, coward. Adjectives can be the worst: *lazy, stupid, ugly, weak, clumsy, hopeless*. Even verbs can function as global labels: *to lose, to err, to fail, to waste, to disgust*.

When fighting global labels, being specific means realizing that your label is referring only to a part of yourself or of an experience. Be specific by replacing the label with an accurate definition of what you don't like. For example, instead of "I'm fat," say, "I'm fifteen-and-a-half pounds over my ideal weight." Instead of saying to yourself, "I acted like a jerk," say, "I stammered when she asked me about my old girlfriend."

Being balanced involves describing some of the many parts of yourself to which your label does not apply: "I'm fifteen-and-a-half pounds overweight, but I carry it well and look good in my new clothes." "I stammered when she asked me about my old girlfriend, but I told the story about the old doctor well."

Here are some self-statements to get you started in rebutting global labels:

- Stop! That's just a label.
- That's not me, that's just a label.
- Labels exaggerate a tiny part of me.
- No more labels—be specific.
- I refuse to call myself names.
- Exactly what do I mean by _____?
- My experience is too limited for global labels ever to be true.
- Labels are mistaken opinions based on limited experience.
- I have far more good points than bad.

Here is an example of a global labeler who broke the habit. Peg was a mother of four whose critic typically assaulted her with a barrage of labels:

- Call yourself a mother? You're the Wicked Witch to your kids.
- You've failed Billy. He's backward.
- You ignore the older kids. They're running wild.

Peg wrote these self-statements down and underlined all the global labels: "Wicked Witch . . . failed . . . backward . . . ignore . . . wild." She began her rebuttal by replacing the labels with the facts: she sometimes raises her voice to her kids, she worries about Billy because at two years old he doesn't talk much. She spends her available time with Billy and Susan, her youngest kids, and thus has little time for her older children.

To balance her shortcomings, Peg included her good points: maintaining consistent rules for her kids, providing them with good clothes and nutritious food, and taking a real interest in their educations. Here is Peg's complete rebuttal:

- Enough already!*
- These are harsh, distorted labels.*
- Sometimes I yell at my kids.
- I do provide my kids with consistent rules and enforce them fairly.*
- I worry about Billy not talking, but that's just his way.
- It's not my fault. Billy doesn't talk much.
- Billy will talk when he's ready.*
- I wish I had more time for Jim and Andrea, but they actually do fine with what time I can give them.
- They will benefit from the freedom.

- I refuse to call myself names anymore.*
- I've always done my best, and will keep trying.

Peg marked the strongest rebuttals with an asterisk and used them whenever she started criticizing herself for being a poor mother.

3. Filtering. The most important rule for forming rebuttals to filtering is to look for balance. Since you are stuck in a rut from which you can only see negative things, you must make a strong effort to climb out and look around. Look for the opposite of what you filter for. If you tend to focus on loss in your life, make up rebuttals that stress all the good things that have not been lost. If you see rejection all around you, write descriptions of the times when you were accepted and loved. If you obsessively look for instances of failure, make up rebuttals that remind you of your successes.

Here are some general rebuttals to use to fight filtering:

- Wait! Open your eyes! Let's see the whole picture.
- I may have lost things in my life, but there are many treasures I still have and cherish.
- There I go again, looking for rejection.
- This one defeat can serve to remind me of my victories.
- There's more to life than pain (or danger, sadness, etc.)
- I can choose to stop blanking out the good things.

Bill always filtered his reality for signs of rejection. A typical morning would net for him these kinds of negative self-statements:

- The bus driver was irritated because I didn't have correct change.
- Maggie's mad at me for not wanting to buy a new dryer.
- The new accountant won't like my bookkeeping.
- God, Stan is grouchy. Better pussyfoot with him.

Upon analysis, Bill found that there were other aspects to all these relationships that he was only dimly aware of. He replayed conversations and situations in his mind until he could identify the positive elements: although the bus driver may have been rejecting, most drivers were neutral or even friendly if you yourself were pleasant. His wife, Maggie, actually wasn't mad about the dryer, she had a different opinion and appeared willing to discuss it rationally. Furthermore, he and Maggie had been rather close and playful over the past week. Having not even met the new accountant, Bill was filtering the future, predicting rejection without evidence. Regarding his

- No more blaming!
- Everyone makes mistakes—it's just human.
- No brooding. The past is over and I can do no more about it.
- I can acknowledge my mistakes and move on.
- I always do my best according to my awareness at the moment.
- Let it go.
- I am not in charge of others.
- I don't have to blame myself for others' behavior.
- I accept the consequences of my actions, but I will not wallow in guilt for past errors.

George was an unemployed waiter who blamed himself for all his own problems and for his girlfriend's problems as well. He blamed himself for losing his job, for failing to find another, for being depressed, for depressing his girlfriend, and for making her over eat because she was worried about him. Whenever he thought about work or his girlfriend, the simple phrase "It's all my fault" flashed into his mind like a neon sign. A wave of guilt and depression would come over him.

To rebut this recurring thought, George wrote a sort of pep talk that he imagined his old high-school coach might say to him:

- Bullshit!
- It's not all your fault.*
- Stop bad-mouthing yourself.
- You were laid off because business is slow—which isn't your fault.
- It's hard to get restaurant work for the same reason—which also isn't your fault.
- Pity and guilt are just sapping your strength.
- Polly's a big girl. She's in charge of her own life and feelings.
- You can't *make* her feel one way or another.
- Accept her support, and stop kicking yourself.

George starred and memorized the statements he needed to hear most often.

6. Personalization. If your pathological critic is constantly comparing you to others, your rebuttal should stress that people are individuals, with unique combinations of strengths and weaknesses. You

should concentrate on affirming your own right to be exactly as you are, without apology or judgment.

If your personalization takes the form of assuming that every situation or interaction involves a judgment of you personally, you should compose rebuttals that point out the fact that most of what goes on in the world has nothing to do with you. Encourage yourself to check things out, to assume nothing.

Here are some typical rebuttals effective for countering a pathological critic who is given to personalization:

- Hold it! No comparisons!
- Everybody's different, with different strong and weak points.
- I am just me, without comparisons.
- I can describe myself accurately, without reference to others.
- Assume nothing!
- Check it out.
- Most of the universe has nothing to do with me.
- Don't be so paranoid!
- Everybody else is too concerned with their own act. They're not watching me.

Gracie was a poor tennis player made poorer by personalization. She felt that everyone on adjacent courts was aware of her play. She was constantly comparing herself to the others around her and nearly always deciding that her play was inferior. This is what her pathological critic had to say:

- All eyes are on you.
- Wow, what a serve. Mine isn't half as fast.
- Look how Denny is always in position, while I'm tripping over my own feet.
- My partner's quiet. What did I do?
- Missed! Damn, I look like an amateur.

It got so bad that finally Gracie avoided playing. She had to spend a week thinking about her pathological critic's attacks and getting them down on paper. Then she composed the following rebuttal:

- Stop this!*
- It's just a game, to have fun.*
- Everybody else is concentrating on his game.
- Athletic ability doesn't determine worth.
- Stop comparing.*

- Everybody's game is uneven sometimes.
- Everybody's an individual, with unique strengths and weaknesses.*
- They're not watching me, they're watching the ball.

Gracie found that she could remember the starred items and use them when she returned to the courts. Her game improved when she stopped comparing and just concentrated on hitting the ball. And her self-esteem fared better because she had fun and didn't suffer from so many unfavorable comparisons.

7. Mind reading. If you have the habit of mind reading, you need to make up especially strong rebuttals that will shock you back to reality. The most important rule is the one about being specific and accurate. Concentrating on the known facts is the best way to stop assuming that others are thinking ill of you.

Here are some general rebuttals that are effective against mind reading:

- Stop it! Nonsense.
- I have no way of knowing what they're thinking.
- The only way to know others' opinions is to ask them straight.
- Assume nothing.
- Check it out.
- What else could that mean? Why assume the negative?
- What are the facts? Spell them out.
- "Intuition" is just an excuse for guessing.

Josh was a librarian who dreaded having to work the front desk. He felt that the patrons were irritated at him if he couldn't answer questions, had to charge them fines, or had to make them wait during busy times. Words would pop into his head: "Slow . . . stupid . . . mean . . . arrogant," and so on. He would feel very anxious and flustered. When he examined the words that popped into his head, he found they stemmed from mind reading. He was then able to slow them down and elaborate them. This is the stream of negative self-talk that he wrote out in full:

- She thinks I'm slow.
- She hates me.
- He thinks I'm stupid not to know that author.
- He's being nice, but it's just patronizing. He's really seething inside because I was mean enough to charge the full fine.

- She thinks I'm an arrogant civil servant because I made her wait while those little kids checked out their books. She'd like to report me to the head librarian.

Josh's rebuttal took the form of repeated shouts inside his head, and careful observation of the observable facts. Here is his full written rebuttal:

- Stop it!
- This is just somebody's grandmother trying to get through the line in a hurry.
- I don't know what she thinks, and I don't care.
- Stop it!
- This is just some guy who doesn't know who wrote the book he wants. That's all I know about him.
- Stop it!
- This is just some poor slob who forgot to get his books back on time. He's being nice about paying the fine. Who knows how he really feels?
- Stop it!
- This is just some girl in a pink sweater who had to wait till the kids were through. She doesn't know me from Adam, and I don't know what she's thinking.
- If it's important to know what these people are thinking about me, I could ask them. But it's a waste of time trying to invent their opinions for them.

When he was actually at work, Josh couldn't run such long monologues through his head. When the negative word "Stupid" flashed into his mind, he would just mentally shout back, "Stop it! He's just a guy who needs info . . . that's all."

8. Control fallacies. If your pathological critic uses the fallacy of undercontrol, your rebuttal must emphasize your real and actual control over your life. The most crucial rule is the one about being specific—tell yourself exactly what you can do to regain control of a given situation. Here are some general rebuttals to get you started:

- Wait! I'm doing it again.
- No more victim crap.
- I got myself into this mess and I can get myself out.
- Let's see, what can I do?
- This helpless feeling is just the critic talking.
- I refuse to let my critic take away my power.

- This situation is the result of a long series of actions or inactions on my part. It can be changed by direct action.

Randy was a new father who felt overwhelmed. The new baby had upset his habitual routine, he was short on sleep, and his pathological critic was taking the opportunity to whittle away at his self-esteem. Here is what Randy's critic was saying:

- You're exhausted.
- You're not coping.
- You'll never get organized.
- You're helpless.
- You're just barely treading water.
- There's nothing you can do.
- There's always another chore for you to do.
- It will be like this for at least the next two years.

Randy knew he would need a strong rebuttal to arrest this constant stream of defeatism. Instead of "No!" or some other mental interrupter, he imagined a bomb going off inside his head. When the smoke cleared, he imagined a wise, compassionate mentor who would calmly rebut his pathological critic. His mentor, he realized, looked a lot like the alien Yoda from Star Wars. This is what Randy wrote down for his mentor to say:

- (BOOM!)
- Randy, relax and take a deep breath.
- Stop thinking about all the things you feel you have to do.
- Find that calm place inside yourself. Breathe deeply and enjoy a moment of peace.*
- You are in control, not the baby.
- True, you must respond to your child, but you have choices as to how. You will get better and better at this.
- Muster your resources and take charge.*
- Remember your options: setting up alternating shifts with your wife, babysitters, letting the grandparents help, new parents' groups, hiring someone to do house and yard work.
- You can cope.
- You can get enough rest and enjoy your baby.

The fallacy of overcontrol, where you take responsibility for the pain and unhappiness of those around you, is functionally similar to

self-blame. Use the suggested rebuttals in the self-blame section to cope with overcontrol.

9. Emotional reasoning. To fight the distortion of emotional reasoning, you need to follow the rules about being nonjudgmental and specific. Create rebuttals that omit emotionally loaded words like *love, hate, disgusting, furious, depressed*, and so on. Constantly encourage yourself to look for the thoughts that underlie and create the painful emotions you feel. Those underlying thoughts are where the pathological critic does his work. Those thoughts are what you need to ultimately refute.

- Here are some rebuttals for calming emotional turmoil and countering the underlying distorted thoughts:
- Lies! My emotions are lying to me.
- Distrust all sudden feelings.
- There is nothing automatically true about my feelings.
- Look for the underlying thoughts.
- What am I telling myself that makes me feel so sad, so anxious, so angry?
- Correct the thoughts and the pain will go away.

Marjorie was a baker at a gourmet bakery. The other people in the bakery never knew whether Marjorie would be on cloud nine or down in the dumps. She was ruled by her feelings. She would see a headline about an airplane crash, think about death, feel a wave of sadness, and emotionally reason that her life wasn't worth much, since it could be snuffed out in a moment. Someone would ask her a perfectly innocent question about her muffins in the oven, and she would tell herself that some criticism was implied, feel threatened and anxious, and emotionally conclude that her job was in danger. She would tell herself that her credit cards would never be paid off, feel depressed, and emotionally decide that she was a failure, that she would always be poor and miserable.

Marjorie's problem was exacerbated by the fact that she was not very aware of the chain reaction from experience to thoughts to emotions to emotional reasoning. She just felt lousy and figured she would always feel lousy. When she started writing down her self-talk, she had a hard time getting back to the thoughts. This is all she came up with at first:

- I feel sad, hopeless. Life is so fragile.
- I'm afraid of losing my job. I don't know why, I just feel on edge whenever someone looks over my shoulder.

- I must be a failure. I feel overwhelmed by my debts.

To go further, Marjorie had to literally invent her thoughts. She would make up a thought that sounded like it might account for her feelings. Once she did this, she found that she could say, "Yes, that's it," or "No, it's more like this . . ." Eventually she completed this list:

- I'm going to die.
- It's horrible.
- I can't stand it.
- They'll throw me out on the street with no references.
- I'll starve.
- I'll lose my apartment, my bike, everything.
- I'll be bankrupt and on welfare.
- All my friends will hate me.

These are the catastrophic messages from her pathological critic that triggered Marjorie's depression. She began creating her rebuttal by crossing out the emotionally loaded words: "die, horrible, throw me out, lose, bankrupt, hate."

Then Marjorie made up a strong beginning for her rebuttal to shock her out of her emotional funk. Finally, she created reminders to be specific and a balanced list of her rational resources to counter the critic's catastrophic predictions. Here is her full rebuttal:

- Stop! Just stop this right now, Marjorie!
- This garbage is 99 percent feelings.*
- There's nothing automatically true about feelings. My feelings change when my thinking changes.*
- How did I get into this? What was I thinking about?*
- That's ridiculous. That's my critic talking.*
- I have more on the ball than I give myself credit for.*
- I'm in good health. I can take care of myself.*
- I'm a good baker. They depend on me around here.
- I'm still young and smart enough to straighten out my finances.

Marjorie used the starred rebuttal points whenever she felt overwhelmed. Depending on the thoughts that started the whole episode, she would improvise the rest of her rebuttal. Sometimes she couldn't pinpoint the thoughts that started her down the familiar path of emotional reasoning. She would then have to get out the pencil and paper again and use the three-column techniques.

Sometimes Marjorie didn't need to know the original negative thoughts. She found that she could say to herself, "These are feelings, not facts. They will pass in a little while. Wait it out." And in a few hours the emotional storm usually began to abate and she felt more confidence in herself again.

and Stan, Bill reminded himself that Stan was frequently grouchy. What else is new? Here is Bill's full rebuttal as he first wrote it out:

- So what if a bus driver doesn't like me? In half an hour we'll have forgotten each other.
- Maggie and I are feeling close; that's what counts.
- Disagreements don't necessarily imply rejection or anger.
- Don't predict rejection.*
- Others are just as likely to like as to not like me.
- What's important is that I like myself.*
- The only serious rejection is self-rejection.
- People don't have to like me.*
- Look on the loving side. Look for the smiles.
- Stan and I have been friends for ten years, why should I worry?

The items marked with an asterisk are the ones that Bill found especially telling. He recalled them whenever he felt the familiar feeling of impending rejection, or whenever he felt depressed after a social interaction that seemed to have gone poorly.

4. Polarized thinking. The rule about being specific will guide you in fighting polarized thinking. Instead of describing life to you in absolute blacks and whites, describe specific shades of gray, soon as you find yourself making a snap judgment about yourself, "Wait a minute. Let me be more precise."

A helpful technique in writing rebuttals of polarized thinking is use percentages. The car show wasn't a total disaster, your card got eighty out of a hundred points. The meal you cooked isn't garbage, rather the entree was 50 percent OK, the salad was 60 percent, and the dessert was 40 percent. Your party wasn't a complete bore—60 percent of your guests had a good time, 30 percent were bored, and the remaining 10 percent never admit to having fun matter where they are.

These general rebuttals show the tack to take against polarized thinking:

- Wrong!
- Nothing is totally anything.
- Let me be more precise.
- Remember the gray zone.
- No more absolutes.
- What are the percentages?

- There are infinite gradations of good and bad in all I do.

An example of polarized thinking is Arlene. She was a loan officer at a bank, a job that unfortunately reinforced her tendency toward polarized thinking—applicants either qualified for their loan or not, with no middle ground. Arlene's problem was that she applied this same rule to her own performance—she was either perfectly competent at her job, or she was incompetent. Her pathological critic put it like this:

- You've got to get these loan packages together by three o'clock.
- If you don't, you've totally screwed up.
- You're either competent or you're not.
- The packages were late. What a disaster.
- You can't do anything right.
- You're completely disorganized. Just look at this desk.
- If you don't do this job right, you'll end up on welfare.

Arlene countered this polarized thinking by creating a rebuttal voice. She imagined a patient, wise teacher, similar to a favorite professor she once had in college. This teacher was with her all the time at work, like an invisible guardian angel. This is the rebuttal she wrote and imagined spoken in her teacher's voice:

- Slow down, now.*
- Stop thinking in black and white.
- Sometimes you're perfectly competent.
- Sometimes you're less competent.
- You're never totally incompetent.
- Not every job is life and death.*
- Not every missed deadline is a disaster.
- You're punctual 90 percent of the time.
- Your job is secure and you do it well.
- Everybody makes mistakes.
- This is not the end of the world.*

At work when she heard her pathological critic start up, Arlene had her teacher rebut with the starred statements.

5. Self-blame. To rebut self-blaming statements, you must rigorously weed out judgmental statements and replace them with balanced ones. State the facts of the situation without judging yourself, and use reinforcing self-statements like the following: