



Cognitive Restructuring 101

Healthy emotional management is key to optimizing the therapeutic benefits achieved whether or not they are associated with taking medication for ADHD.

Where to start? To successfully change our bad habits in a long-lasting way, we must become aware of and able to identify the irrational beliefs (cognitive distortions) that put a spoke in our wheels.

Cognitive Distortions Frequently Seen in Adults with ADHD

Overgeneralization	Drawing general conclusions based on a specific misconception. These erroneous conclusions then serve as the starting point for analyzing other situations whether or not they are connected to the initial misconception. (“I’ll never find a job if I can’t even remember to pick up my clothes at the drycleaner’s.”)
Magical thinking	Relying on factors beyond our control (e.g., luck) to solve our problems. (“When I achieve my optimal dose, all my problems will be solved.”)
Excessive comparison	Self-esteem is based on the ability to stand out from the others in daily life. (“I’m the only student in my group who needs extra time to write my exams. I’ll never fit into university.”)
Fallacy of fairness	Believing that life should be just and fair in all situations. (“I shouldn’t have to make a greater effort than my friends to do well in school.”)
All or nothing	Tendency to overlook subtleties in the way we interpret the situations we experience. Seeing things in black or white (polarized thinking). (“My supervisor wrote “to be revised” next to certain items. I’m really good for nothing.”)
Mind reading	Concluding, with any proof, that people do not respect us and do not believe that we are capable of succeeding in the things we do. (“My colleagues don’t have faith in me!”)
Shoulds	Imposing unrealistic obligations on ourselves that hinder the way we function. These are “false shoulds,” which increase our feelings of guilt and inadequacy instead of motivating us in a positive way. (“I should be capable of establishing the right priorities without having to stop and think about it.”)



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Blaming	Constantly blaming ourselves or others without taking into account all the aspects that may have contributed to the problem. (“She should understand that I have ADHD and should automatically forgive me for having missed our date.”)
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(Adapted with the authors’ permission: Ramsay, J. Russell, Rostain, Anthony L. (2007) Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Adult ADHD. An Integrative Psychosocial and Medical Approach. Routledge)

The next step is **cognitive restructuring**, which is designed to help us:

- Become aware that our thoughts affect our negative emotions.
- Question the thoughts that feed our negative emotions.

The following guidelines can help with initiating the four steps in the cognitive restructuring technique.

Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 4
Situation	Automatic thought(s)	Negative emotion(s)	Substitute thought(s)

1. **Identify our negative emotion(s)** as soon as they appear (Column 3). People who are emotionally hypersensitive often tend to bottle up their emotions, which eventually explode. This step is crucial because it helps us develop a greater awareness of our emotions (called “affect” in psychology).

2. **Briefly summarize the situation** that triggered your negative emotion(s) (Column 1).

3. **Identify your automatic thought(s)**. An automatic thought is an interpretation made in the heat of the moment. These are also called “hot cognitions.”

4. **Generate substitute thoughts** based on concrete evidence or observations. The element of “concrete evidence or observations” is what creates the difference between cognitive restructuring and positive thoughts. This same element helps cast reasonable doubt on our automatic thoughts.



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From Theory to Practice: Example

Using Ramsay and Rostain’s cognitive distortion chart, Peter Harvey realized that he has been prone to **magical thinking** since he received his ADHD diagnosis and his doctor prescribed medication for it. Here is the cognitive restructuring exercise he performed following this realization:

(2) Situation	(3) Automatic thought(s)	(1) Negative emotion(s)	(4) Substitute thought(s)
I have to study for my chemistry exam. It’s still a week away.	“I have plenty of time!” “Things will go better next week when my meds really kick in.” (magical thinking)	Performance anxiety	“One week isn’t that much time because unexpected things can come up.” “The last time something unexpected came up, I was paralyzed with anxiety.” “My doctor insisted that I shouldn’t rely only on my meds.”

