



# Let's TALK



USING COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL  
INSIGHTS IN GROUP DISCUSSIONS

# Using Cognitive Behavioral Insights in Group Discussions

Cognitive distortions, or bad mental habits which can be gently challenged and can be disproved factually, pose obstacles to intrapersonal and interpersonal communication alike. Learning how to recognize these cognitive distortions can help us to catch them before they lead us into an unhealthy mental spiral. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a therapeutic intervention which aims to teach patients how to recognize the cognitive distortions that fuel their anxiety and depression.<sup>1</sup>

David Burns, a leading psychiatrist specializing in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, identifies in his book **Feeling Good Together** a few common obstacles to a reasoned discussion and understanding between people.<sup>2</sup>

Here's how we've adapted Dr. Burns's insights for conversations between discussion partners.

We can divide these obstacles into "**Ten Distortions.**" These distortions can quickly damage a calm and good-natured discussion.

DISTORTION	DEFINITION	EFFECTS ON DISCUSSION
<b>1. All-or-Nothing thinking</b>	Viewing discussion partners or a disagreement in "absolute, black-and-white categories." <sup>3</sup> In this distortion, "shades of gray do not exist." <sup>4</sup>	All-or-Nothing Thinking can result in "straw-manning" <sup>5</sup> another's arguments, or oversimplifying an opposing view and then attacking that hollow version of the opinion with which one disagrees. Someone who "straw-mans" another's argument might say that their opponent is "evil" or irredeemable because of their views.

1 Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (Penguin Books, 2018), 7-8.

2 David D. Burns, *Feeling Good Together: The Secrets of Making Troubled Relationships Work* (New York: Broadway Books, 2008), 6-7.

3 Burns, *Feeling Good Together*, 6.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Check [out our resource on logical fallacies](#), which are similar to cognitive distortions in their tendency to derail conversations.

DISTORTION	DEFINITION	EFFECTS ON DISCUSSION
<p><b>2. Overgeneralization</b></p>	<p>Overgeneralizing other discussants’ entire worldviews based on a <i>single set</i> of claims they’ve made is an emotional and rational error which prevents an accurate understanding of their perspectives. Overgeneralization frames debate or discussion as part of a “never-ending pattern of” personal or historical “frustration, conflict, and defeat.”<sup>6</sup></p>	<p>Overgeneralization can involve the tendency to label others or see them as part of a group or historical pattern that we dislike. For instance, telling someone who supports universal healthcare that they are “a socialist” is an overgeneralization. Telling someone who says something favorable about law enforcement that they “don’t support marginalized people” is also an overgeneralization.</p>
<p><b>3. Mental Filter</b></p>	<p>Searching for the weak points in others’ arguments rather than listening for redeeming or true features of their perspectives. Mental filterers block out the merits of other people’s arguments and wait for their turn to talk so they can attack all the faults in the other side’s presentation. They don’t use the opportunity to <u>listen as if they’re wrong</u>.<sup>7</sup></p>	<p>This can involve dismissing someone because they overuse verbal fillers such as “um” or “like,” or otherwise struggle to articulate their arguments well either in delivery or in content. Discourse groups are not formal debate societies, and the spirit of the discussion should not be purely competitive. Be generous to your fellow members or discussants, and try to model good speaking skills rather than insulting other speakers.</p>
<p><b>4. Discounting the Positive</b></p>	<p>Insisting that good points other people make are irrelevant to the discussion, are “harmful,” or conceal some secret bad-faith motive.</p>	<p>Discussants might dismiss arguments by saying “that’s offensive,” “that’s a dog whistle,” or “that’s just another ideological talking point.” Any of these criticisms might be valid, but in order to dismiss someone else’s point, discussants must explain why an otherwise good point is out-of-bounds, inappropriate, offensive, or implicitly underhanded.</p>

6 Burns, *Feeling Good Together*, 6.

7 Adam Grant., “Kids, would you please start fighting?” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Nov. 4, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/04/opinion/sunday/kids-would-you-please-start-fighting.html>.

DISTORTION	DEFINITION	EFFECTS ON DISCUSSION
<p><b>5. Jumping to Conclusions</b></p>	<p>Assuming and creating narratives about others that “may not be warranted by the facts. There are three common patterns:”<sup>8</sup></p> <p><b>Mind-Reading:</b> “You assume that you know how the other person thinks and feels about you.”<sup>9</sup> You might feel judged by a fellow discussant’s tone or reaction to your comments.</p> <p><b>Reverse Mind-Reading:</b> Discussants assume other people know what they will find offensive, or should know about their unique personal ‘triggers.’</p> <p><b>Fortune-Telling:</b> Discussants assume that no matter what, their fellow discussants won’t be persuaded or open their minds to a new perspective, and that nothing will come out of the conversation, so they should not even bother.</p>	<p><b>The dangers of Mind-Reading:</b> When a discussant projects their own discomfort onto their discussion partners or a discussant assumes they are being judged without reasonable evidence, those involved in the discussion are either likely to lash out or shut down during heated conversations.</p> <p><b>The dangers of Reverse Mind-Reading:</b> Fellow discussants have had different experiences, come from different backgrounds, and are at different stages of emotional and intellectual development. It is impossible for anyone to <i>fully</i> anticipate what might upset or offend someone else. Discussants cannot expect others to be able to fully understand or protect their unique inner lives.</p> <p><b>The dangers of Fortune-Telling:</b> If discussants believe that a conversation will not be productive, and that their fellow discussants are stubbornly set against them from the start, then they create a self-fulfilling prophecy and put themselves through unnecessary and premature anxiety and irritation.</p>
<p><b>6. Magnification and Minimization</b></p>	<p>Overemphasizing or overreacting to fellow discussants’ faults or objections and minimizing their points of agreement or constructive disagreement.</p>	<p>One discussant might say to another, “You’re <i>totally</i> wrong!” Or, “Are you listening to <i>anything</i> I’ve said?!” Or, “Do you care about this issue <i>at all</i>?”</p>

8 Burns, *Feeling Good Together*, 6.

9 *Ibid.*

DISTORTION	DEFINITION	EFFECTS ON DISCUSSION
<b>7. Emotional Reasoning</b>	Allowing emotions to prefigure one's thoughts, and assume that one's "feelings reflect the way things really are." <sup>10</sup>	A discussant might feel convinced that another person has said something offensive or unreasonable, just because they had a strong reaction to it.
<b>8. Should Statements</b>	Placing expectations or demands on the way in which other people <i>should</i> or <i>must</i> think and behave during discussions and in general.	Discussants might say to one another, "What right do you have to say that?" Or, "You have no right to say that!" Or, "What would someone like <i>you</i> know about X issue?"
<b>9. Labeling</b>	Resorting to name-calling or the tendency to label people's entire character or identity in order to dismiss them.	Discussants might generalize someone based on their apparent identity, like "typical white boy" or "of course someone like <i>you</i> would think that." Or, discussants might resort to generalized insults like "you're a jerk," or "why are you so inconsiderate?"
<b>10. Blame</b>	Blaming a single participant or point-of-view for a discussion that has turned toxic, rather than trying to find a common solution to the conflict.	Discussants might say "you're being totally unreasonable!" Or, "You never listen!" Or, "I just can't talk to someone like you! You're impossible!"

<sup>10</sup> Burns, *Feeling Good Together*, 7.

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## TIPS FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS:

*Consider asking these questions before and/or after a discussion:*

- 1 Which cognitive distortion do you think you could improve upon? Which did you notice happening today?
- 2 Are discussions better when people have reasons and evidence to support their ideas?
- 3 What role, if any, does personal experience play in making a good argument?
- 4 When do you feel the most comfortable about expressing your opinions? When do you feel uncomfortable?<sup>11</sup>

## HOT TIPS:

- To engage with a particular point someone has made before they move on to a new line of argument, students can raise their hand and say “On that point!”
- Consider using [FIRE’s debate guidelines](#) and “[FIRE’s Guide to Creating Your Own Debate Program](#)”

<sup>11</sup> Kate Shuster, “Civil Discourse in the Classroom,” *Southern Poverty Law Center* (Montgomery, AL), 2009, 17.  
<https://ericed.gov/?id=ED541263>.

# Bibliography

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Burns, David D. *Feeling Good Together: The Secrets of Making Troubled Relationships Work*. New York: Broadway Books, 2008.

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Shuster, Kate. “Civil Discourse in the Classroom.” *Southern Poverty Law Center* (Montgomery, AL), 2009. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED541263>.



## How FIRE can help

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We are counting on you to help cultivate a culture of free speech on your campus! FIRE is here to provide guidance and resources. We have a team of experts at your disposal who can help decode and demystify your school's policies, help you talk to administrators, and offer advice on tricky free speech questions. Additionally, we can send guides, literature, speakers, and FIRE materials. Please do not hesitate to contact us with questions. We are here to help!