

Step 1: Learn to identify depressive thoughts

Depressive thoughts are unfair and unrealistic. They are *distorted* because they are inaccurate reflections of how the world is or how you are. The table below (and continued on the next page) describes some common forms of distorted thinking in depression¹:

Filtering.

In this kind of depressive thinking, you only look at the bad, never the good. Because all you see is the negative side, your whole life appears to be negative. **But realistic thinking equally considers positive and negative aspects of your life.**

Overgeneralization.

In this kind of depressive thinking, one negative event seems like the start of a never-ending pattern. If one friend leaves, they all will. If you fail the first time, you'll fail every time. **But realistic thinking recognizes that one disappointing situation does not determine how other situations will turn out.**

All or Nothing Thinking.

You see the world in terms of extremes. You are either fat or thin, smart or stupid, tidy or a slob, depressed or joyful, and so on. There is no in-between. Gradual progress is never enough because only a complete change will do. *"Who cares that I did half of it? It's still not finished!"* **But realistic thinking sees people and events as falling somewhere between the extremes, towards the middle, where most things are found.**

Catastrophizing.

A small disappointment is seen as though it were a disaster. For example, you were slightly late in completing a small project, so your entire month is ruined: you react to the imagined catastrophe (a terrible month) rather than to the little event (a late project). **But realistic thinking sees events in their true importance, not overemphasizing negative events.**

Labeling.

You talk to yourself in a harsh way, calling yourself names like "idiot", "loser", or whatever the worst insults are for you. You talk to yourself in a way you would never talk to anyone else. **But realistic thinking doesn't use these kind of insults because they are not fair, you wouldn't talk to anyone else that way, and they are unnecessarily discouraging.**

¹ These types of distorted thinking are described in an excellent book, *Feeling Good* by David Burns (Avon, 1992).