

Overcoming Depression

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Depression is an emotion people often try to hide, sometimes blaming themselves for their unhappiness or believing nothing could relieve incredible feelings of despair. If you are experiencing depression so severe that it's 1) difficult to concentrate; 2) have changes in your appetite; 3) either cannot fall asleep or stay asleep; 4) have lost interest in the people or events you used to enjoy; 5) and if you are thinking about committing suicide*, it is vital to make an appointment with a medical doctor, psychologist, psychotherapist or other professional who understands and can help you discover the source of your unique concerns. *IF you are having suicidal thoughts, see a mental health professional TODAY. Call 911 or go to a hospital emergency room if needed.

Suffering the intense pain of depression isn't a sign of weakness, nor is it an indication of spiritual failure (though some harmful personal choices such as drug use, alcoholism or other addictive behaviors can exacerbate depression). Certain medications or medical conditions can actually cause depression. Profound depression can also be a direct result of physical, sexual or emotional abuse. If you recognize depression in yourself, you can allow it to be a catalyst to get the help you need and deserve, from a trained medical professional. Just as indicator lights on the dashboard of a car signal specific actions to take—such as getting fuel when the fuel gauge lights up—depression can be an indicator to attend to a legitimate need.

Everyone experiences depression at various times in life! In fact, depression is often referred to as the *common cold of emotional disorders*. One person could experience depression as a direct result of the loss of a loved one; another can have equally challenging depression because of physiological, emotional or mental concerns. Still others' depression can be fueled by repetitively thinking negative thoughts. In psychology, these thoughts are referred to as cognitive distortions, which can have an ongoing negative influence on thought processes, reasoning ability or even remembering. **This article will focus on specific things you can do to transform cognitive distortions into healthy thought patterns.** *It is not intended to replace seeing a mental health professional.*

Emotions such as depression, worry, fear, anxiety or anger can be driven and prolonged for decades by overlooked (and overfed!) cognitive distortions. Proverbs 23:7 says "...as a man thinks, so is he." How and what we think influences not only how we feel but our daily choices, actions and relationships.

Automatic thoughts often occur in distorted patterns. That distorted thinking is to your mind like a house of mirrors is to how you see your physical body. If you've looked at your reflection in a carnival's house of mirrors, you realize you aren't ten feet tall—or ten feet wide, even if a mirror makes you seem to look that way. You know each of the mirrors presents a distorted reflection, so you choose not to accept the image of reality presented to you there. However, a child who grew up in a house of mirrors might think she looks like the distorted reflections she has seen over and over again. And, if you have thought in distortions for weeks, months, or years, you will first need to recognize that a thought is distorted before you can make an intentional choice to change it.

It is vital to train yourself to notice when automatic negative thoughts occur. If you have spent years thinking the way you currently think, it will take repeated, conscientious effort to reduce patterns of distorted thinking. Like old-style radios, your mind can emit "static" that won't fade unless it's fine-tuned. The first step to reducing mental "static" is recognizing when your thoughts are distorted. [If you'd like help discovering new ways of thinking, please look in the accompanying *Biblical Perspectives*, which offers ideas to address each type of distorted thinking.]

Thoughts are your perception of what is happening or has happened to you, and many of the emotions you experience are generated by various thoughts.

The following list presents ten common types of distorted thinking, or cognitive distortions. (Both Aaron T. Beck, M.D., and David Burns, M.D., have completed extensive research regarding the impact of distorted thinking on feelings and actions. The list of cognitive distortions, below, has been influenced by their work.) **Place a check next to any of the cognitive distortions you have experienced. Place two checks if you are currently experiencing that type of distorted thinking.**

- _____ **Emotional Reasoning:** taking your emotions as valid indicators of reality. Examples: If you feel hopeless, you see your situation as hopeless, impossible, discouraging or debilitating. If you feel sad, you become dejected, believing your life is (and always will be) miserable and/or depressing.
- _____ **Jumping to Conclusions:** reacting to what you think or assume happened, was said or meant by another person without getting all of the facts. Example: When someone says “I can’t go with you Saturday because I have plans,” you assume, “She is saying that because I’m so [unhealthy, boring, worthless, etc.] that no one wants to be with me.”
- _____ **All or Nothing Thinking:** views life in black or white, good or bad. The person with this mindset is often a perfectionist, believing he or she (or someone else) is a failure if anything goes wrong in any situation, conversation, job, relationship, etc. Realizing that everyone experiences—and can survive—significant loss, hurt, disappointment, and sorrow does not occur to this mindset.
- _____ **Should Thinking:** having unspoken rules about what you or others should do or should have done. Examples: “I should have known better.” “He should apologize.” “I am going to stay angry until she does what she should do.”
- _____ **Overgeneralization:** seeing one event as a never-ending pattern. For example: after failing a history exam, saying “I should just drop out of school. I am never going to make it.” [The previous example combines two types of distorted thinking. In addition to Overgeneralizing, it adds Should Thinking.]
- _____ **Catastrophizing:** expecting that any situation will result in disaster and believing that you are somehow destined to suffer continued hardships, misfortunes, pain and trouble. [Instead, when someone is in the midst of severe pain or challenging life circumstances, he could look at it as an opportunity to learn and grow rather than a never-ending pattern of defeat.]
- _____ **Filtering:** focusing on a negative detail in any situation and dwelling on that while “filtering out” any positive aspects of the circumstance, event, person or concern. Filtering occurs any time your perspective about yourself or anyone else is limited to the negative. Even in a genuinely negative current event, you could focus on something positive you can gain instead. For example: “That group seems to be cliquish, so I’ll find another group where I can make friends” avoids the negative filter that says, “I never fit in anywhere. No one wants me around, so I’ll just become a loner.”
- _____ **Blaming & Labeling:** when you blame yourself for something beyond your control or hold others responsible for how you feel. Example: “If she hadn’t treated me the way she did, I wouldn’t feel discouraged now.” “Because _____ left me, I am always going to feel horrible.”
- _____ **Control Myth:** either thinking you are responsible for the happiness and well-being of everyone in your life—or thinking they are somehow responsible for your well-being, since you are helpless to stop your pain [sorrow, difficulty, etc.].
- _____ **Overlooking the Positive:** rejecting positive life experiences and believing they somehow don’t begin to reduce the negatives you have faced, will face, or are facing now.

Changing your thought processes requires conscious, repeated choices to meditate on truth that sets you free from debilitating patterns of thinking, feeling and living. You can allow God to lead you to healing thought processes in His Word instead of repeating old lies over and over. For example, if you woke up today and looked in the mirror, focusing on a perceived flaw, you can look in Psalm 139 and repeat the truth stated in verse 14: “God says I am fearfully and wonderfully made!” Believing that truth can help you overcome lies that keep you trapped in discouragement or despair.

As you make intentional choices about what you think, you will likely notice corresponding changes in your feelings and behavior. [There are some exceptions: illness, brain injury, medications, and other factors can affect your thoughts and emotions, too. Please see a physician if you have medical concerns.]

The following page offers a journaling exercise to help you take charge of your thoughts. Try spending 15-20 minutes each day identifying and replacing any cognitive distortions that occur. Making this a regular habit can help you experience a life of freedom.

“We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5, ESV).

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17-18, ESV).

When you realize you’re feeling anxious, depressed, worried, fearful, etc., pause and prayerfully identify any automatic negative thoughts that could be fueling your current emotional state. Write those in the column on the left. In the “Cognitive Distortion” column, write down any of the ten types of distorted thinking that apply. Then—and this is the most important part of this exercise—write down Scriptural promises you can claim and apply, to consistently train your brain to think healthfully and biblically!

Automatic Thought	Cognitive Distortion	Healthy Response— Applying Truth
<i>I'm a failure if I don't do this perfectly.</i>	<i>Global labeling or All or Nothing Thinking</i>	<i>There isn't a "perfect" way to do this exercise; just doing it is going to help me grow. I can depend on God to help me—see Psalm 54:4.</i>

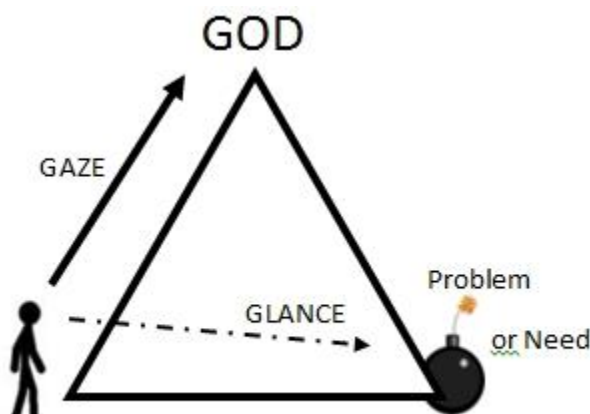
“He will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy” (Job 8:21, NIV).

Memorizing and meditating on Scripture can help you develop new thought processes. As you consider the verses on the following pages, you can apply the Glance/Gaze Principle delineated in Matthew 6:25-34:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

Picture Jesus, walking with His disciples. Smiling, He points out birds flying overhead as He talks about God’s provision for every need. He doesn’t tell His children to ignore needs or problems. He doesn’t encourage us to deny that challenges exist. Instead, He teaches a better way in Matthew 6:33—the Glance / Gaze Principle. This principle explains how to Glance at our needs and problems (so we don’t live in a state of denial) and then Gaze at Jesus, entrusting all of our needs, challenges and difficulties to His perfect care.



As you choose what you think about, you are essentially choosing to glance at your concerns rather than be dominated by them. The verses on the following pages give practical ideas of how to gaze at God in the midst of challenges, problems, needs or distress. And, there are hundreds of other verses to discover in God’s Word to help with your specific areas of concern!

Following are examples of Scripture to apply to help you transform your self-talk from negative to positive:

Emotional Reasoning - Though emotions can be legitimate indicators of real concerns, when thoughts are distorted by emotional reasoning, the result can be depression, anxiety and even despair. When you are aware of this type of distorted thinking, **you can choose** not to believe everything your emotions tell you. Instead, write down these verses and how you can apply them:

For we walk by faith [we regulate our lives and conduct ourselves by our conviction or belief respecting man's relationship to God and divine things, with trust and holy fervor; thus we walk] not by sight or appearance. 2 Corinthians 5:7, Amplified (AMP)

When doubts filled my mind, your comfort gave me renewed hope and cheer. Psalm 94:19, NLT

Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul? Why are you crying the blues? Fix my eyes on God—soon I'll be praising again. He puts a smile on my face. He's my God. When my soul is in the dumps, I rehearse everything I know of you, From Jordan depths to Hermon heights, including Mount Mizar. Psalm 42:5-6, The Message

Jumping to Conclusions - Instead of reacting to what you think or assume happened, was said or meant by another person, you can try to understand the other person's perspective. You can ask questions about what you think you heard, such as the open-ended, "Help me understand..." You can keep your body language calm so that the other person feels safe talking with you. Instead of believing the worst about what someone thinks about you, you can realize you are loved by God. When you allow His love to overflow your heart, you are less likely to believe others are out to get you. And, even when others are against you, you can experience God's peace (see Isaiah 26:3).

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. James 1:19-20, ESV

My dear friends, don't believe everything you hear. Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God. There are a lot of lying preachers loose in the world. 1 John 4:1, THE MESSAGE

All or Nothing Thinking - Someone once said that the difficulty of perfectionism isn't really that we're trying to be like God; it's that we're trying to be God. If you look at life through the lens of trying to be in control of circumstances or of people, you'll likely be disappointed a great deal of the time. Asking God to open your mind to fresh ideas can provide new perspective.

A man's mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps and makes them sure. Proverbs 16:9, AMP

And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, NASU

Should Thinking - God is a God of hope, of renewal, conviction and LIFE—not of condemnation. As you allow Him to encourage your soul, you can release "should" thinking to His limitless love. Doing what you **can** do in His strength, you can stop mentally beating yourself up about what you "should" do.

I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength. Philippians 4:12-14, NLT

Overgeneralization - Looking at life through the lens of God's Word can bring an entirely different focus to all of life. Instead of seeing "normal" as what you have known, you can allow God to give you His original definition for your life—one that isn't fueled by old generalized thought patterns.

Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. Psalm 37:3-6, NIV

Catastrophizing - When your automatic thoughts focus on disaster, tragedy, or on past, present or future suffering, it is difficult to enjoy today. God's Word offers hope in the midst of all circumstances, conditions and situations. You can train your thoughts to rest in Him.

Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall. Psalm 55:22, NIV

When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your consolations delight my soul. Psalm 94:19, NASU

Filtering - This type of distorted thinking occurs when you minimize positive events, statements or people and maximize negative words, interactions or circumstances. If you have allowed your mind to park on negativity, you can make a conscious effort to renew your mind with God's Word. If you think this is too big of a challenge, keep in mind that you will succeed when you rely on God's limitless strength rather than your weaknesses.

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. Philippians 4:8, NASU

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:1-3, NIV

Blaming & Labeling - The best way to avoid living in a state of continual criticism and blame—either of yourself or others—is to focus on God rather than yourself, your problems, or others. Practice the “Glance → Gaze” approach of thinking.

Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You. Blessed are You, O Lord! Teach me Your statutes. With my lips I have declared all the judgments of Your mouth. I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, as much as in all riches. I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways. I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word. Psalm 119:11-16, NKJV

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Colossians 3:1-4, NIV

Control Myth - Experiencing freedom from concern about what others think of you will happen as you allow God to bring peace, moment-by-moment, deep within your soul. Relying on Him, you can be 100% responsible for your own emotional state rather than allowing other people’s choices to control you. You will also realize the futility of trying to “make” other people happy and will realize they, too, are 100% responsible for their own lives. You don’t have to be dominated by the futility of trying to control your world.

For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise. God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne. The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted. Psalm 47:7-9, NIV

I will lift up my eyes to the hills – from whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. Psalm 121:1-4, NKJV

Overlooking the Positive - God’s Word brings lasting hope, unfailing love, and clear affirmation that can help you in every area of life. You can be confident in His Presence.

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:28; 31-39, NLT.