

Dr. Don Colbert: How to Defeat Distortional Thinking During a Pandemic

Pandemics place another layer of stress on top of the pressures modern life already bring, and they can potentially produce stress responses in our bodies around the clock. The good news is that bad stress is based not on actual events but on our *reactions* to our perceptions—and our reactions are within our control.

It all comes down to how we choose to perceive and think. Dr. David Burns identified 10 distortional thought processes that I expand upon as a basis for defeating stress and creating an atmosphere of peace and joy within our souls, homes and communities.

10 Distortional Thought Patterns

1. **“What if” thinking:** During a pandemic or outbreak, you probably have heard people say things like, “What if I get this virus?” “What if I lose my job?” “What if someone I love dies of this?” Those thoughts may even find their way inside your own mind. But “What if” thinking almost always leads to anxiety and fear. As believers, we have a sure future as we are told in God’s Word. We don’t live in a “what if” reality but rather a “God said” reality. God’s Word says that He always causes us to triumph, that He will take care of all of our needs, that He will never fail to provide for us and protect us.
2. **Catastrophizing:** I call this kind of thinking “awfulizing” because the mind actually magnifies unpleasant events and transforms them into something more awful or horrible than they really are. You might

stand in line to buy toilet paper, only to have it run out before you get to the rack. Someone who “awfulizes” situations will see this as a sure sign that they will never get the supplies they need.

Reframe those moments. Choose to see long lines and other delays as relaxation breaks when you practice a couple of deep-breathing exercises or check emails or text messages. I call this choosing to “awesomize” those moments! In pandemics and at all times, we can “awesomize” rather than “awfulize” our circumstances.

3. **Habitually expecting the worst outcome:** When the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world, some people responded by saying, “I’ve been waiting for this to hit.” Their faith was in Murphy’s Law, which states that anything that *can* go wrong *will* go wrong. People tend to personalize this and think, “If something bad is going to happen, it will probably happen to me.”

This is such a dangerous habit. All thoughts can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Instead of expecting the worst possible outcome, begin to expect something good to happen to you. Start thinking of best-case-scenarios and use them like a weapon against Murphy’s Law. Dethrone that terrible “law” and enthrone the “law of Christ” in your life! It works.

4. **Leaping to conclusions:** I call these people “grim leapers.” They mistakenly believe that they know what another person is thinking without having any facts to support it. They habitually make negative assumptions that fuel their anxiety. For example, someone declines your invitation to dinner during a pandemic and you think they don’t value you anymore, when in fact they feel run-down and don’t want to expose you to anything harmful. Or their motivation may not even be related to the pandemic. It’s far too easy to misread someone’s motivations and to read our own fears into their

actions. Let's leap to good conclusions and give people the benefit of our trust and love.

5. **Black-and-white thinking:** People who suffer from this thought pattern view circumstances in black and white, with no shades of gray. They are perfectionists who see their work as either flawless or worthless. All news is either amazing or terrible. There is no in-between. At a deeper level, such people tend to gain a false sense of control by thinking, "If I control everything in my environment, my family and I will be protected." This kind of all-or-nothing perspective is a recipe for disaster, and it causes a constantly elevated level of stress.

The good news is, God never expects us to attain perfection. The Bible even promises that righteous people will fall many times, but each time they will get up and press on. That's the lifestyle of the believer: rejecting prideful perfectionism for the humble but relentless pursuit of God.

6. **Unenforceable rules:** This person has a rigid set of rules about what *should*, *must* or *ought to* be done and tries to put people and events into a little box. During pandemics, people's rules get firmer and more numerous. You might think, "Everyone should wear masks and stop going in public!" Or you might think, "People should chill out and be a little more friendly!" These expectations are unrealistic because nobody has control over circumstances or other people. The more unrealistic and unenforceable the rules are, the greater the stress.

The only *should* statement we need to make is: "I should do everything I can to give love and mercy, especially during this time when people's emotions are frayed." That's a recipe for a healthier life.

7. **Labeling:** Pandemics can bring out the worst instincts to denigrate other people. Some label others as "fear-

mongers” for being concerned about public health, while others accuse those who are not openly worried of being cavalier with the lives of others. Insults start piling up: “Ignorant.” “Unscientific.” “Foolhardy.” All degrading words divide, leaving us weaker than before. Labels destroy the very sense of love and belonging we need during times of heightened challenge.

Loving others sincerely is the healthiest thing we can do (Rom. 12). It does no good to delegitimize each other. Let’s respect and learn from the different perspectives each of us brings to the table.

8. **B** You’ve met this person: He or she discounts all positive information. You might say, “It looks like the rate of infection is lower than they previously thought,” and he will say, “Yes, but did you hear about the cruise ship that’s been infected?” People like this have a talent for retaining all bad information. They find the gray lining in every silver cloud. Make sure you’re not one of these people. Replace your filter so you highlight the good stuff and not the bad.
9. **Emotional reasoning:** This person treats feelings as facts. Anxiety becomes a firm reality. Perceived danger becomes actual, not just an imagination. Because our emotions are drawn to rise and fall with news cycles and a myriad of other factors, it pays during pandemics to distinguish emotions from facts. When we do, we remove the steering wheel of our minds from the grip of our emotions.
10. **The blame game:** In crisis moments, the temptation is often to blame others or God for what is happening. People feel they are victims of unfair circumstances, and they want to assign blame. During the COVID-19 outbreak, I heard people say things like, “It’s that other country’s fault. They should have been more transparent with the rest of us.” And, “Our leaders

failed us. They should have acted quicker.” And, “Our leaders acted too quickly and did more harm than good. They turned America into a police state.”

There are serious issues to discuss regarding national and personal responses to extreme health crises, but those discussions never move forward on the wings of blame. To blame and complain is to lower your walls of immunity.

Protecting ourselves against pandemics has a lot to do with the battle in our minds. We can confidently gain victory by filling our minds with peace, joy and certainty—attitudes that boost the immune system and lead to strength, optimism and triumph over any invader. {eo}

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