

# *“Who Says I’m Wrong?”*

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Cognitive-behavioral therapists typically present a list of “cognitive distortions” that describe the common errors we make at the level of our **thoughts**. (You are likely to find a list of those distortions in virtually every CBT workbook, and even in the [Articles](#) section of my website). However, there is another process of faulty reasoning that has to do with forming incorrect **beliefs**, and at this deeper level, our judgment can get even further off track. Why does the mind generate such causal mistakes, or fill in missing data with false information? The following list cites some credible sources that explain how and why we tend to produce (and even defend) a faulty belief system. Look closely to see if you can identify any famous persons mentioned here, and consider whether you too might share the same vulnerability to human error.

## ***Authorship Confusion.***

Daniel Wegner creates the phrase “authorship confusion” to describe how people mistakenly assume responsibility for causing an event, simply because the thought preceded the occurrence.<sup>1</sup>

## ***‘As If’ and ‘What If’ Thoughts Lead to Believed-In Imaginings.***

Theodore Sarbin offers the phrase “believed-in imaginings” to describe the storied constructions people use to verify the existence of improbable events. A strong level of commitment to one’s story leads to a sense of realistic perception, causing the believer to move from an “as if” perspective to a conviction of actual reality. The person considers something as if it were true, and pretty soon, it becomes true. When this happens, the belief and the phenomenon cannot easily be differentiated.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Causal Mistakes and Reasoning Errors.***

Jean Piaget states that from a very young age, people develop mistaken beliefs about causal relationships between the mind and the physical world. Examples include thinking that actions, gestures or mental operations such as counting can bring about a desired event or stave off something bad, or that there is a meaningful relationship between random occurrences.<sup>3</sup> Numerous other authors agree that the mind makes certain mistakes by allowing individuals to connect unrelated events while giving them unique significance.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Cognitive Fusion.***

Steven C. Hayes explains that we believe our thoughts to be literally true when perhaps they are not. Most of us have a propensity to look “from” our thoughts instead of “at” our thoughts, since ideas arise convincingly inside our heads in the form of language. Additionally, certain notions are defended and maintained because they exist in networks – or “relational frames” – with other thoughts. In this way, ideas become entrenched and we become “fused” with our thinking. *“I’m right and I can give you the reasons”* is a strong indicator of cognitive fusion.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Cognitive Motivation to Reduce Uncertainty.***

Leonard Zusne and Warren Jones illustrate that, “A ‘why’ question requires a ‘because’ answer. If the information is not available, incorrect information will be used.”<sup>6</sup> The authors describe that we all have a cognitive motivation to secure explanations, however faulty. Other researchers agree that when individuals are faced with conditions of incomplete knowledge, they are compelled to construct beliefs in order to fill the gap of ambiguity and the unknown. This cognitive motivation to remove uncertainty is so powerful that the mind will prefer to fill the gap with incorrect information rather than to maintain a condition of uncertainty.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Congruence is Preferred Over Truth.***

Zusne and Jones also describe how we want to believe something simply because it matches up with how we feel. Our conclusions are geared toward seeking an internal state of congruence and consistency, and in this way we can replace the disturbing psychological condition of uncertainty or imbalance.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Difficulty Tolerating Uncertainty.***

Jeffrey S. Victor explains why even disturbing beliefs receive credibility, writing, “A mistaken explanation for emotional pain can be preferable for a confused person to the ambiguity of uncertainty.”<sup>9</sup> Donald Spence agrees that because people do not easily tolerate uncertainty, they create irrational accounts when plausible explanations are unavailable.<sup>10</sup> In an attempt to make life meaningful and for it to make sense, people assemble beliefs from a number of sources in order to stitch together personal unknowns. Steven Jay Lynn, et. al. concur that for this reason, individuals are vulnerable to a condition of *overconfidence* that is susceptible to the mind’s many flaws and imperfections.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Evolution Favors Anxious Genes.***

Aaron T. Beck explains that “our tendency to exaggerate the importance of certain situations – believing them to be a matter of life and death – overmobilizes our apparatus for dealing with threats and thus overrides normal functioning. It has been said that ‘evolution favors anxious genes.’ It is better to have ‘false positives’ (false alarms) than ‘false negatives’ (which miss the danger) in an ambiguous situation. One false negative – and you are eliminated from the gene pool. Thus, the cost of survival of the lineage may be a lifetime of discomfort.”<sup>12</sup>

### ***Magical Thinking.***

Numerous famous writers including Sigmund Freud, Margaret Mahler, and Ernest Becker have discussed magical thinking as a primitive defense that is often

used to relieve certain anxieties tied to the existential pain of separation, self-esteem, limitation, longing, loss, chance, death, and uncertainty. Magical thinking is described as the belief that thoughts and reality are connected and that thinking can influence the actual world. This is a universal condition that begins in infancy and continues to a large extent throughout everyone's lifetime. Omnipotence (the belief that we caused something by thinking about it) is one form of magical thinking. Superstitious thinking is also similar to magical thinking.<sup>13</sup>

Heather Stone explains that magical thinking often emerges as an attempt to bypass ambiguity and the necessary psychological work of authentic suffering and existential awareness.<sup>14</sup> Other authors clarify that under such conditions of uncertainty, lack of information, or an inability to explain phenomena, magical thinking will predominate. Magical thinking especially emerges when elements of chance, accident, hope, fear, and danger are conspicuous.<sup>15</sup> Other forms of suffering that provoke magical thinking are seen at such times when profound longings emerge that accompany a perceived lack of control.<sup>16</sup> From a behavioral perspective, magical thinking exists largely to control the uncontrollable.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Overvalued Ideation.***

The International Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation describes this phenomenon as “when the person with OCD has great difficulty understanding that his/her worry is senseless.”<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Grayson similarly says it is “the belief that the concerns underlying the symptoms are entirely realistic.”<sup>19</sup> Steven Phillipson states that from this perspective, “the patient is not fully aware in a logical way that the threat is of an irrational nature.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***Reinforcement.***

Famous behaviorists such as Ivan Pavlov, Edward Thorndike, and B.F. Skinner all produced well-known studies on superstitious behavior, demonstrating that when reinforcement and behavior are accidentally or intermittently paired,

people learn that certain meaning exists, and that meaning has lasting power over them, even if it's wrong.<sup>21</sup>

***Susceptibility to Coincidence.***

Stuart Vyse writes that our personal beliefs end up being formed by observing coincidences, and that this human sensitivity to coincidence is an “overlooked psychological truth and a monumental understatement.”<sup>22</sup> Raeann Dumont concurs, “Our personal belief system has been constructed by observing coincidences. . . . All of us, in every stage of life, have a limited reality.”<sup>23</sup>

***Thought-Action Fusion.***

Stanley Rachman describes “thought-action fusion” as a tendency to confuse thinking about an action with the action itself.<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Daniel M. Wegner and Thalia Wheatley, “Apparent Mental Causation: Sources of the Experience of Will,” *American Psychologist* 54, no. 7 (July 1999): 480-492.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore R. Sarbin, “Believed-In Imaginings: A Narrative Approach,” in *Believed-In Imaginings: The Narrative Construction of Reality*, ed. Joseph de Rivera and Theodore R. Sarbin (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1998), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1929), 139-147.

<sup>4</sup> Donald P. Spence, “The Mythic Properties of Popular Explanations,” in *Believed-In Imaginings*, 217-228; Jeffrey S. Victor, “Social Construction of Satanic Ritual Abuse and the Creation of False Memories,” in *Believed-In*

*Imaginings*, 209; Leonard Zusne and Warren H. Jones, *Anomalistic Psychology, A Study of Magical Thinking* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1989), 13 and 14.

<sup>5</sup> Steven C. Hayes, *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2005), 57; “Real Tools for Real Change,” in *Quick Tips for Therapists*, [www.newharbinger.com](http://www.newharbinger.com); Jason B Luoma, Steven C Hayes, “Cognitive Defusion,” in *Empirically Supported Techniques of Cognitive Behavior Therapy: a Step by Step Guide for Clinicians*, ed. W. T. O’Donohue, J.E. Fisher, and Steven C. Hayes (New York: Wiley, in press), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Zusne and Jones, *Anomalistic Psychology*, 13, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Piaget, *The Essential Piaget*, 146; Zusne and Jones, *Anomalistic Psychology*, 13 and 14; Steven Jay Lynn, et al., “Rendering the Implausible Plausible: Narrative Construction, Suggestion, and Memory,” in *Believed-In Imaginings*, 133.

<sup>8</sup> Zusne and Jones, *Anomalistic Psychology*, 229-243.

<sup>9</sup> Victor, “Creation of False Memories,” 209.

<sup>10</sup> Spence, “The Mythic Properties of Popular Explanations,” 217-228.

<sup>11</sup> Lynn, et al., “Rendering the Implausible Plausible,” 133.

<sup>12</sup> Aaron T. Beck and Gary Emery, *Anxiety Disorders and Phobias: A Cognitive Perspective* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 155, 180 and 181; Mel. D. Faber, *New Age Thinking, A Psychoanalytic Critique* (Canada: University of Ottawa Press, 1996), 27; Robert W. Firestone, *The Fantasy Bond* (Los Angeles: The Glendon Association, 1985), 182 and 183; Sigmund Freud, *An Autobiographical Study*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London:

Hogarth Press, 1959), 66; Giora Keinan, "Effects of Stress and Tolerance of Ambiguity on Magical Thinking," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67, no. 1 (July 1994): 48-55; Margaret Mahler, et al., *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 44; Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World*, 139-147; Géza Róheim, *Magic and Schizophrenia* (New York: International Universities Press, 1955), 10, 11, 45 and 46; Stuart A. Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 196-211; Zusne and Jones, *Anomalistic Psychology*, 13-32, 229-259.

<sup>14</sup> Heather Stone, *The Therapeutic Value of Magical Thinking: Exploring the Gap Between Longing and Fulfillment*, Doctoral Dissertation (Petaluma: Meridian University, 2005), 8, 10, 13, 20, 21, 113, 142, 179-181, 192.

<sup>15</sup> Vyse, *Believing in Magic*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Mahler, et al., *The Psychological Birth*, 44; D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study of The First Not Me Possession," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* XXXIV (1953): 94; Jacqueline D. Wolley, "Thinking about Fantasy: Are Children Fundamentally Different Thinkers and Believers from Adults?" *Child Development* 68, no. 6 (December 1997): 998; Vyse, *Believing in Magic*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Vyse, *Believing in Magic*, 81.

<sup>18</sup> International OCD Foundation, [www.ocfoundation.org](http://www.ocfoundation.org), Glossary of Terms.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Grayson, *Freedom from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: A Personalized Recovery Program for Living With Uncertainty* (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 2003), 236.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Phillipson, "God Forbid," [www.ocdonline.com](http://www.ocdonline.com).

<sup>21</sup> Edward L. Thorndike, *A History of Psychology in Autobiography* 3, ed. Carl Murchison (Worcester, MA: Clark University, 1936), 263-270; Ivan P. Pavlov, *Conditioned Reflexes: An Investigation of the Physiological Activity of the Cerebral Cortex*, trans. G.V. Anrep (Oxford, England: Dover Publications, 1960), 291; Pavlov, "Lecture I," in Shipley Thorne, ed. *Classics in Psychology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1961), 789; Burrhus Frederic Skinner, "'Superstition' in the Pigeon," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 38 (1948): 168-172.

<sup>22</sup> Vyse, *Believing in Magic*, 60.

<sup>23</sup> Raeann Dumont, *The Sky is Falling* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 43.

<sup>24</sup> Stanley Rachman, "Obsessions, Responsibility, and Guilt," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 31, no. 2 (February 1993): 149-54; Rachman, "A Cognitive Theory of Obsessions," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 35, no. 9 (September 1997): 793-802.