

Should Statements

Cognitive Distortion

Should (ought or must) statements are an unhealthy negative thinking pattern that we believe to be true. The *should* statement is often related to something we perceive as lacking in ourselves or something we didn't do correctly and can cause feelings of guilt, shame, self-loathing, and self-defeat when the behavior falls short of our standards.

On the surface, the *should* message appears to give a direction for where we would like to be, but right behind the statement is the unspoken message of: *but I am not, but I do, or but I didn't*. These subtle messages reinforce that we are falling short of perceived or identified expectations. When we try to motivate ourselves or others by using *should, ought, or must*, it adds pressure and can create resentment. Paradoxically, you end up feeling apathetic and unmotivated to act.

Should statements are also commonly expressed towards others, often delivered with a sanctimonious attitude as if the individual with the *should* thought knows what is best for that individual or pointing out how they let them down. The statement is often uttered while venting to someone other than the person they take issue with. In this situation, the statement is fraught with judgment, and rarely does the individual consider that they are basing their opinion on incomplete information about the circumstance. Directing *should* statements toward others will leave you feeling frustrated, bitter, and self-righteous.

Should statements fall into the classification of cognitive distortions. They are automatically biased negative thoughts that influence and reinforce feelings and actions not based on facts but a thinking error. Even though your thoughts create your emotions, your emotions cannot prove that your thoughts are accurate, and when they are rooted in a cognitive distortion, the thoughts become a self-perpetuating vicious cycle.

How to reduce *should* statements

The goal is to increase awareness that you are being critical of yourself or someone else unnecessarily. Because *should* statements are a made-up rule you are making, you can decide if that rule is useful and act on it, revise it, or get rid of it.

1. Catch yourself thinking or saying a *should* statement at the moment.
2. Rationally think about the *should* statement
 - Who says I/they should?
 - Where is it written that I/they should?
 - What would happen if I didn't follow through with the *should* statement?
 - Is my expectation realistic, or if directed towards someone else, could my expectations be different from theirs?
 - Translate *should* statements into wants.
 - What do I want to do?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of having the *should* rule for myself/someone else?
 - On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 10 (most important and want to act), how big of a priority is this compared to my other priorities?
 - What course of action would be to my advantage, and am I willing to act on it?
3. No matter the outcome of your discovery, redirect your thoughts, begin to change the language, and substitute words. Replace *should* with *it would be nice if, I wish I could, or I could*.
 4. Recognize that changing the way you think is a work in progress, and keep at it!

Reference: Burns, D. D. (1999). *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* (2nd ed.). Avon Books.

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