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USING COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL
INSIGHTS IN GROUP DISCUSSIONS



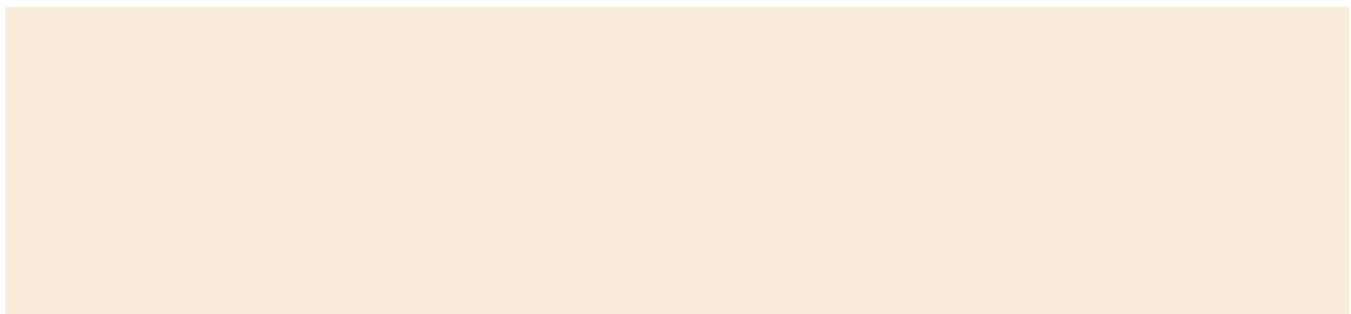
Cognitive distortions, or bad mental habits which can be gently challenged and can be disproved factually, pose obstacles to intrapersonal and interpersonal communication alike. Learning how to recognize the cognitive distortions that we engage in can help us to catch them before they lead us down an unhealthy mental spiral. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a therapeutic intervention which aims to teach patients how to recognize the cognitive distortions that fuel their anxiety and depression.¹

David Burns, a leading psychiatrist specializing in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, identifies in his book [Feeling Good Together: The Secrets of Making Troubled Relationships Work](#) a few common obstacles to a reasoned discussion and understanding between people.²

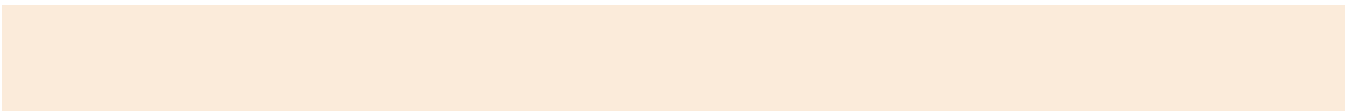
Here's how we've adapted Dr. Burns's cognitive insights for discussions between interlocutors. An **interlocutor** is simply someone you talk to, like a discussant.

We can divide these obstacles into "Ten Distortions."³ These distortions can quickly damage a calm and good-natured discussion.

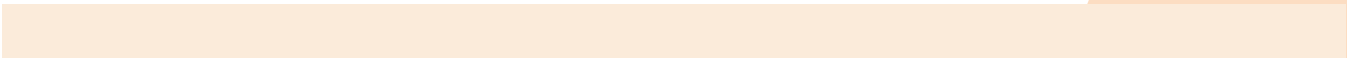
DISTORTION	DEFINITION	EFFECTS ON DISCUSSION



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<p>2. Overgeneralization</p>	<p>Overgeneralizing other discussants' entire worldviews based on a <i>small number</i> of claims they've made is an emotional and irrational error which prevents an accurate understanding of their perspectives. Discussants view the debate or discussion as part of a "never-ending pattern of" personal or historical "frustration, conflict, and defeat."⁷</p>	<p>Overgeneralization can involve the tendency to label our interlocutors or see them as part of a group or historical pattern that we dislike. For instance, telling someone who supports universal healthcare that they are "a socialist" is an overgeneralization. Telling someone who says something favorable about law enforcement that they "don't support marginalized people" is also an overgeneralization.</p>
<p>3. Mental Filter</p>	<p>Discussants search for the weak points in their interlocutors' arguments rather than listening for redeeming or true features of their perspectives. They filter out the merits of other people's arguments and wait for their turn to talk so they can attack all the faults in the other side's presentation. They don't use the opportunity to <u>listen as if they're wrong</u>.⁸</p>	<p>This can involve dismissing someone because they overuse verbal fillers such as "um" or "like," or otherwise struggle to articulate their arguments well either in delivery or in content. Discourse groups are not formal debate societies, and the spirit of the discussion should not be purely competitive. Be generous to your fellow members or discussants, and try to model good speaking skills rather than insulting other speakers.</p>
<p>4. Discounting the Positive</p>	<p>Discussants insist that good points other people make are irrelevant to the discussion, are "harmful," or conceal some secret bad-faith motive.</p>	<p>Discussants might dismiss arguments by saying, "That's offensive!" Or, "That's a dog whistle!" Or, "That's just another ideological talking point." Any of these criticisms might be valid, but in order to dismiss someone else's point, discussants must explain why an otherwise good point is out-of-bounds, inappropriate, offensive, or implicitly underhanded.</p>



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<p>7. Emotional Reasoning</p>	<p>Discussants allow their emotions to prefigure their thoughts, and assume that their “feelings reflect the way things really are.”¹¹</p>	<p>A discussant might feel convinced that another person has said something offensive or unreasonable, just because they had a strong reaction to it.</p>
<p>8. Should Statements</p>	<p>Discussants place expectations or demands on the way in</p>	



Burns, David D. *Fatherhood: The Science of Men's Relationships*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.

Grant, Adam. "Kids, Would You Please Start Fighting?" *NYC* (New York, NY), Nov. 4, 2017.



How FIRE can help

We are counting on you to help cultivate a culture of free speech on your campus! FIRE is here to provide guidance and resources. We have a team of experts at your disposal who can help decode and demystify your school's policies, help you talk to administrators, and offer advice on tricky free speech questions. Additionally, we can send guides, literature, speakers, and FIRE materials. Please do not hesitate to contact us with questions. We are here to help!