

# Complexes

From StepWisdom, by Eleanor Spackman Alden, LCSW, BCD

The Jungian term “complexes” refers to highly charged emotional states accompanied by distortions in thinking.

Complexes can be pleasant psychological states, such as infatuation, but due to their enjoyable nature they seldom bring people into therapy until they cause difficulties in someone's life. Falling head over heels in love with someone barely known is certainly a complex, but few complain to anyone about such a state until disappointment or disillusionment occurs.

To others observing a person in a complex, the heightened emotionality may seem exaggerated, and in hindsight even the person who was overwhelmed by the complex may feel they *were beside themselves*. Statements such as, “I was not myself,” “You know I didn't mean that,” “I couldn't have said that,” or “You know I was exaggerating,” often follow the experience of being in a complex, which can feel as if a sub-personality has taken over the person expressing the heightened emotions and distorted thoughts. Statements with loaded phrases that may include: *You always* or *you never*, or *you should*, or mind reading such as *I know what you are thinking*, are clues to complexes being engaged. They are defensive positions, as if some part of the person was engaged in protecting an aspect of the psyche that feels vulnerable.

Couples and families often find themselves engaged in arguments with several complexes raging at each other, no one hearing the other accurately and with little resolved in the fight.

There are many forms of illogical thinking that occur when one is in a complex. They are generally characterized by the following:

1. **GENERALIZING AND LABELING:** Generalizing a few personality traits into a negative or positive judgment. Generalizing can also mean coming to a conclusion based on only one or two pieces of evidence, and ignoring, dismissing, or minimizing other information or evidence. For example: You have been late to work three days this week. So you are “always late” or an “irresponsible human being” and “never on time.”
2. **NEED TO BE RIGHT:** Where one acts as if one is on trial, needs to prove him or herself right and other ideas and opinions are wrong. For example, refusing to admit any responsibility for a bad outcome because being right is more important than relationships or anything else. This can be characterized by an inability to apologize at all or genuinely.
3. **CONTROL ISSUES:** This can be characterized as feeling either controlled by others who are victimizing you, or thinking you have to be in total control to avoid such. It can also lead to self-blaming inappropriately, feeling responsible for the suffering or joy of others.
4. **DEMAND FOR CHANGE:** The belief that others will change their minds or behavior if you do a good enough sales job on them, pressure, cajole, plead, or make them feel guilty enough so you can only be happy, or they can only be happy if they comply.
5. **MIND READING:** Belief that you know how others feel or think without them saying anything. You know why they act the way they do, and you know how others feel about you without checking your assumptions or guesses. The word “exactly” often appears in sentences when this kind of thinking occurs: “I know exactly what you are thinking!” or “I know exactly what he is up to now.”

6. **FILTERING AND SIFTING:** This form of distorted thinking occurs in most of the other complexes. One magnifies details that support the complex and minimizes or dismisses all details that contradict the complex's position.
7. **POLARIZED IDEAS:** There are no gradations of gray or color in this thinking. Things are good or bad, right or wrong, Perfection images are acceptable or everything is a failure. Nothing is in the middle.
8. **IT ISN'T FAIR:** You think you know what is fair, and that such should be the dominate value for all around you. Intense resentment can occur when others either are not concerned with your idea of fairness or they disagree with it.
- 9: **SHOULD AND BLAME:** One has a list of rules about how humans ought to behave and think and feel. Anger and blaming often follow the image of another who does not abide by these rules. Any pain or reversal of fortune is someone else's responsibility and they are to blame, probably because they broke one or some of the rules you live by.
10. **EMOTIONS, THOUGHTS, AND BEHAVIOR ENMESHED:** If you feel unloved, then you are unlovable and your actions are justified. Feelings and the thoughts that sometime accompany them are not examined as independent experiences, and the endless choices in behavioral responses are not examined.
11. **CATASTROPHIZING:** Constantly hypervigilant for a disaster to happen. Problems are seen as always having the worst outcome possible. Endless questions of "What if..." seem to characterize this kind of thinking.
12. **TAKING EVERYTHING PERSONALLY:** Thinking that everything people do or say or how they look is in some kind of reaction to you. Believing that everyone in a room has the same thoughts about you. Refusal to believe it may have nothing to do with you. Spouses often do this with questions like: "Are you mad at me?" when the other spouse is grumpy and may be mad about work or something else that has nothing to do with the marriage.
13. **COMPETITION:** Constantly comparing oneself to others on some imaginary scale as to who is prettier, smarter, more successful, etc.
14. **I DESERVE BETTER:** Belief that one will be rewarded for doing things for others without their asking. Feeling that self-sacrifice is a payment on some benefit that you come to expect.

Alden, Eleanor Spackman, *StepWisdom, Knowledge from the Ages for Successful StepFamilies*; Tucson: Wheatmark Publishing, 2010.