

ASSIGNMENTS AND READING MATERIALS FOR MODULE THREE

“Focusing On Empowering Interpretations”

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ASSIGNMENT

I'd like for you to choose one of the stressful situations you've been working on and practice using the ABCDE Thinking Model we just went over.

"A" Activating Event: First identify the "A" activating event, or stressful situation, you want to work on and write it below.

"B" Belief: Write down all your disempowering interpretations, or "B" beliefs, about the activating event; in other words, your negative thoughts.

"C" Consequence: What is the "C" consequence (feeling and behavior) of these disempowering interpretations or beliefs?

I feel...

My behavior is... (above the line or below the line?)

"D" Dispute, Distract, or Distance: Since disempowering interpretations or beliefs (i.e., negative thoughts), result in feeling bad and behavior that is below the line, you go to "D" and get any evidence you can to dispute your negative thoughts. If you can't get any evidence to dispute the negative thoughts, take a break from the situation (i.e., distract or distance yourself from the situation momentarily). See if you can reframe the situation and create some empowering interpretations regarding the situation. Make sure you believe the thoughts you say, or they won't help you! Write your empowering thoughts below.

"E" Energy: Notice that when you have the above empowering, or positive thoughts, you feel better and your behavior is more likely to go above the line on the Responsibility Model. And finally, with these positive thoughts, notice the amount of "E" energy you have available to handle the stressful situation as compared to before and write it below.

Example of Completed Activity Using The ABCDE Thinking Model:

"A" Activating Event: First identify the "A" activating event, or stressful situation, you want to work on and write it below.

I have too much work to do in too little time.

"B" Belief: Write down all your disempowering interpretations, or "B" beliefs, about the activating event; in other words, your negative thoughts.

I can't get it all done; other people aren't doing their fair share; I'm not smart enough to figure out how to handle the workload; my family will be upset again tonight when I get home late.

"C" Consequence: What is the "C" consequence (*feeling and behavior*) of these disempowering interpretations?

I feel... overwhelmed, anxious, mad, bad, and helpless.

My behavior is... (above the line or below the line?)

Below the line... mainly lay blame, make excuses, and shame.

"D" Dispute, Distract, or Distance: Since disempowering interpretations or beliefs (i.e., negative thoughts), result in feeling bad and behavior that is below the line, you go to "D" and get any evidence you can to dispute your negative thoughts. If you can't get any evidence to dispute the negative thoughts, take a break from the situation (i.e., distract or distance yourself from the situation momentarily). See if you can reframe the situation and create some empowering interpretations regarding the situation. Make sure you believe the thoughts you say, or they won't help you! Write your empowering thoughts below.

The truth is, I can't do it all, but I can focus on the most important things and begin there. I can choose my attitude. I will always do my best. I am a very capable individual. I will ask for help and advice when I need it. I will make meaningful contributions throughout the day. I will communicate more effectively with my family and come home earlier. As long as I continue to choose to work at this job, I'll be committed to this job, instead of having one foot in this job and one foot out the door.

"E" Energy: Notice that when you have the above empowering or positive thoughts, you feel better and your behavior is more likely to go above the line on the Responsibility Model. And finally, with these positive thoughts, notice the amount of "E" energy you have available to handle the stressful situation as compared to before and write it below.

I have more energy during the day. I don't feel as tired, and I'm less likely to waste my energy on things I can't control or influence at the present time.

READING MATERIAL

Disempowering Interpretations: Eight Ways Our Thinking Hurts Us

A disempowering interpretation means you interpret or think about a situation in a way that gives your power away and leaves you feeling defeated. The following are eight ways our thinking hurts us:

All-or-nothing thinking – When you think in black-or-white categories; if everything doesn't go perfectly, you think you have failed. For example, if you skip one day of exercising, you see yourself as a failure and then don't exercise for the rest of the month.

Overgeneralization – When you view one negative event as the beginning of a never-ending pattern of defeat. For example, if one relationship didn't work out for you, you think you will always be rejected and never have a relationship that will make you happy.

Negative mental filter – When you see only the negatives and ignore the positives. For example, you receive many great comments about a presentation you gave, and a few minor suggestions for improvement, and find yourself ignoring all the positive comments and obsessing about the few negative ones.

Jumping to conclusions – When you read other peoples' minds and assume they are reacting negatively (when you have no evidence), or when you predict the future and think things will turn out badly (when again you have no evidence). For example, you assume that someone is unhappy with your performance without checking it out. Or, you predict that you will flunk an exam even though you have been to class and studied.

Magnify or minimize situations – When you either blow things way out of proportion or shrink their importance inappropriately. For example, you exaggerate feedback from your boss with respect to your shortcomings and minimize the complements that you received.

Emotional reasoning – When your thinking is based totally on how you feel. For example, if you feel inferior, you think you must be a second-rate person, or if you feel angry, you think that proves someone is treating you unfairly.

Should statements – When you criticize yourself or others with thoughts that include “should”, “should not”, “most”, “ought to”, “have to”, and so forth. These types of thoughts only lead to feeling angry and frustrated. For example, you say to yourself, “I shouldn't have eaten that brownie”, or you comment regarding your boss, “She ought to be less rigid and demanding”.

Labeling – When you identify with your short-comings, weaknesses, or limitations, and attach a negative label to yourself. For example, instead of saying, “I made a mistake”, you say, “I'm a fool”, or “I'm a loser”.

Focusing On Empowering Interpretations

Our interpretation of an event determines how we respond to the event. Our response is also directly related to how we feel and how much stress we create for ourselves. I'm sure you can recall a time when two people reacted in totally different ways to the exact same situation. One person may feel challenged while the other feels demoralized. If we make interpretations that empower us, we can influence the outcome in more positive ways. It is also true that if we have disempowering interpretations, we create a more negative result.

How Our Beliefs Affect Our Health

Whenever we're in a stressful situation, we evaluate or appraise the situation using two main questions. The way we answer these questions has a huge effect on our health. For each stressor in our life, the first question we ask ourselves is, "Is this stressor important?" For many of the stressors in our life, if we simply ask, "Is this important?", the answer would be "No, not really..." Probably 10% to 20% of the things we worry about don't even matter that much. Wouldn't you agree? So, we need to be clear about which stressors in our lives are and are not important, and let the unimportant ones go. Just let them go! If we simply did this much, we'd probably worry a lot less, and as a result our health would improve.

If we answer "yes" to the first question (i.e., the stressor is important), then the second question is, "Do I have the necessary resources to handle the situation effectively?" We want to answer "yes" to that question, because if you say the stressor is important, and you can handle it, you'll feel challenged, and you'll have a challenge appraisal. And a **challenge appraisal**, or **empowering interpretation** is important because it's related to a decreased risk of illness. For example, in response to a challenge appraisal, if we assess your cardiovascular system, you will have a lower heart rate and a lower blood pressure. If we assess your endocrine system, you'll have less stress hormones circulating in your body. And if we assess your immune system, it will be enhanced.

If on the other hand, in response to a stressful situation in your life, you say, "It's important, but I don't think I have the resources to deal with it", you're going to feel threatened, and you'll have a threat appraisal. When you feel threatened, your thoughts are negative, or disempowering, and the end result is an increased risk of illness. Now, if we measure your cardiovascular system, your heart rate goes up and your blood pressure increases. If we measure your endocrine system, you have more stress hormones circulating in your body, and your immune system will be suppressed. So, the way you think has huge implications for your health.

The ABCDE Model... Learning To Think In Empowering Ways

The ABCDE model is a great resource to help you challenge and change your beliefs that are disempowering interpretations of the stressful situations in your life into empowering interpretations. Let's briefly review the model.

- **Activating event...** or stressor
- **Belief...** what you think about the activating event (your disempowering interpretation)
- **Consequence...** how you feel and behave in response to those beliefs or thoughts
- **Dispute your disempowering beliefs (and create empowering interpretations)...** or distract... distance yourself from the situation momentarily
- **Energy** you have available to handle the activating event

"A" stands for activating event. An activating event is any event that disrupts your level of well-being and triggers a stress response. Thus, the first step in using the ABCDE model is to notice the presence of an activating event; in other words, to become aware that a situation is stressful for you.

"B" stands for belief and represents what you believe or think about the activating event. It's how you interpret the stressful situation. If you have a positive belief in response to an activating event, you have an empowering interpretation, which means that you interpret the stressful situation in a way that brings power to you as opposed to giving your power away. If you have a negative belief with respect to the activating event, we call this a disempowering interpretation, which means you interpret the stressful situation in a way that gives your power away.

"C" stands for consequence and represents how you feel and how you behave following the activating event. The natural consequence of empowering interpretations is feeling calm and hopeful, less frustrated and upset. With respect to our behavior, we are more likely to take responsibility, and to go "above the line" rather than "below the line" on the Responsibility Model. And when we take responsibility for what we choose and create, we have more energy and are more likely to bounce up from stressful situations in our lives. We're more likely to be resilient.

On the other hand, when our beliefs are disempowering, the consequence is that we feel frustrated, angry, and helpless, and our behavior is more likely to go "below the line". We feel threatened rather than challenged by the stressful situations in our life. And if we maintain these beliefs, we are more likely to give up or put up with the stressful situations in our lives. We are less likely to be resilient.

When this happens, we need to use **"D" on the ABCDE model, which stands for dispute, distract, or distance.** First, we try to get some evidence to dispute our current beliefs that are *disempowering interpretations* of the situation and replace them with *empowering interpretations* of the situation. If we are unable to do this, then we give ourselves permission to distance ourselves from the situation for a while (we take a "time-out", so to speak). At a later time, we can gather evidence to reframe our *disempowering interpretations* of the stressful situation to more neutral interpretations, and gradually to more and more *empowering interpretations*. And, of course, when we do this, we'll notice that the "C" consequence is that we feel better, we're more positive, more hopeful, and our behavior is more likely to be "above the line".

And finally, when we move to **"E" which stands for energy,** we'll notice that our energy level is much higher.

Where Do Our Beliefs Come From?

The main factor that influences the impact of disruptions in our life and how quickly we bounce back is our beliefs, or our point of view. Our beliefs come from three main sources: **scripts** we receive from the environment, **significant events** that happen in our life, and **essential experiences** that we either have or don't have. Let's take them one at a time.

Scripts are verbal messages we receive from the environment. As children, we are mainly influenced by the messages we received from our parents; yet messages from family, friends, teachers, the media, etc., also are important. We want to focus on those messages you received over and over from others that eventually became a part of your belief system. Look at the list below and notice any scripts you've received in your life. Also, think about other scripts you've received that currently have an impact on your life today:

- Money doesn't grow on trees.
- If you can't say something nice, don't say anything.
- Everything will be ok, just hang in there.
- Boys don't cry.
- Hard work never hurt anyone.
- You're not good enough.
- You have to get good grades.
- You can't have ice cream.
- Your passion will take you places.
- People will help and support you.

The messages or scripts you internalize from the environment, and then tell yourself over and over influence your response in stressful situations. Ultimately, these messages or scripts shape the level of functioning you recover to, and the time it takes you to recover. Scripts affect whether you *give up, put up, bounce up,* or *step up* in a stressful situation.

In addition to the scripts we receive from family and the surrounding environment, **significant events** also influence our beliefs. A significant event is any highly meaningful or emotional occurrence that happens in your life. You may remember a time when you lost your purse or wallet and someone returned it to you. This significant event may have helped create or reinforce the belief that there are good people in the world.

On the other hand, suppose you have a belief that long-term relationships are not possible, or that you will be abandoned. Perhaps your parents divorced when you were a child, and you made that mean that you did something wrong, or that long-term relationships are not possible, or that you will be abandoned again. Such beliefs that you established as a child will most likely negatively impact future relationships that you establish as an adult.

The third source of influence on our beliefs is **essential experiences**. Throughout life, we all have a desire to experience the feelings of:

- Being okay
- Feeling loved and valued
- Being seen and acknowledged
- Feeling safe
- Having an impact
- Belonging

These experiences are essential because they satisfy basic human needs necessary for healthy and effective functioning in life. In fact, psychologists agree that having these experiences creates the necessary foundation for us to enhance our resilience and learn to thrive in stressful situations. This foundation of security is similar to a small tree that is firmly staked to the ground on all sides, yet remains flexible to bend with the wind and grow.

All of us, children and adults, need these essential experiences for healthy, effective functioning. Take, for instance, a young boy who believes that in order to be ok and feel a sense of belonging, he must suppress his emotions. Perhaps this child recalls several situations when he was crying and his father and others told him that boys don't cry; that he needed to stop crying and be a man. Because of his experiences, the young boy developed beliefs that stand in the way of him feeling ok, loved, secure, and valued when he is expressing his emotions.

Of course, as adults, it is our responsibility to provide these essential experiences for ourselves. Even if we did not have these experiences as children, it's never too late to provide the necessary foundation of security for ourselves so that we can develop the mental and physical strength necessary to bounce up and recover from change and stressful life situations. For example, when I go to work at the university, it's my job to help myself feel okay, to feel loved, to see and acknowledge what I need, to help myself feel safe, to have an impact on myself and others, and to feel that I belong at the university. It is not my boss' job, or my colleagues' job, or my students' job to provide these essential experiences for me. It's my responsibility to provide them for myself, just like it is your responsibility to provide them for yourself. However, if I go to the university, and I'm in an environment where each of us also concentrates on providing these essential experiences for each other, it's a much more pleasant place to work and we are all more engaged, happy, and productive.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Burns, D.D. (1989). *The feeling good handbook*. New York: William Morrow & Company.
- Burns, D.D. (1980). *Feeling good: The new mood therapy*. New York: Avon Books.
- Ellis, A. (2001). *Overcoming destructive beliefs, feelings, and behaviors*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Jampolsky, L. (1991). *Healing the addictive mind*. Berkeley: Celestial Arts.
- Larkin, W.K. (2010). *Growing the positive mind*. www.appliedneuroscienceinstitute.com
- Seligman, M. (1990). *Learned optimism*. New York: Pocket Books.