

Thinking and Stress

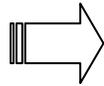
Your thoughts are often the source of physical and emotional problems you can experience in response to any situation. This section will provide you with some information that may help increase your understanding of the role your thoughts in managing stress.

- ❖ In general, your thoughts about a situation (also called “beliefs” or “self-talk”) determine your **PHYSICAL**, **EMOTIONAL**, and **BEHAVIORAL** responses to that situation.

Accurate vs. Distorted Beliefs

- ❖ ACCURATE BELIEFS AND SELF-TALK can enhance your ability to maintain your treatment goals and minimize the negative physical and emotional consequence of a situation.
- ❖ However, sometimes thoughts can be INACCURATE, UNREALISTIC, or DISTORTED.
- ❖ When your beliefs about a situation are inaccurate, unrealistic or distorted, we refer to them as ALARMING SELF-TALK because they result in negative impacts on our physical and emotional health.

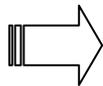
**Accurate
Beliefs**



↓ physical tension
↓ negative emotions
↑ ability to problem-solve effectively

BUT...

**Distorted
Beliefs**



↑ physical tension
↑ negative emotions
↓ ability to problem-solve effectively

For example, imagine how you would feel if you were given a task to do and you had thoughts like:

- ☹ I'm never going to get this work done.
- ☹ I'm terrible at this kind of thing.
- ☹ I'm sure I'm going to just mess it up somehow.

Most people would feel *miserable* if they had these beliefs.

Changing Alarming Self-Talk

The GOOD NEWS IS...

- alarming self-talk can be changed, and
- changing alarming self-talk can be one of the most helpful changes you will make.

Unfortunately it is also one of the most difficult because it takes:

Time + Energy + Persistence = Success

The remainder of this handout is designed to help you get moving down this path. BUT, you will need to take this information and work diligently to make the necessary changes.

Thankfully, the effort brings rapid rewards because changes in your reactions (emotional and behavioral) will begin to occur as soon as you start changing these thoughts.

**A heart at peace gives life to the body,
but envy rots the bones.**

Proverbs 14:30

ABC's of Stress Management

A ctivating event:

Any potentially stressful situation.

- conflict with your boss,
- late for a special event,

Example: A project is due today, and you're not going to make the suspense.

B eliefs or self-talk

ALARMING THOUGHTS are thoughts which often lead to intense emotional responses.

Example: "My boss is going to kill me. The whole project will be delayed now. I should have got it done sooner."

REASSURING THOUGHTS lead to moderate, healthy emotional responses.

Example: "I did the best I could. I'll give my boss a head's up that it's going to be late. He probably won't chew me out. He knows I've been working hard on it and I usually meet suspenses. The project will only be delayed the 24 hours I'll need to get it done."

C onsequences

Potential consequences of alarming thoughts fall into three categories:

Physical - Such as headache, stomach upset, for some, changes in glucose levels.

Emotional - Examples include anxiety, depression, frustration, and guilt.

Behavioral - These include snapping at your spouse, giving up in other areas, withdrawal from people and activities.

Misery is not solely caused by things (Activating Events), but by our view of things (Beliefs or Self-Talk).

4 Types of Alarming Thoughts

1. Demandingness: Thoughts or beliefs in which we expect ourselves, others, or life in general to live up to some type of *unrealistic* standard, goal, or rule which is unrealistic

☞ **Demands About Self**

"I should be able to manage my stress better!"

"I must get my weight down to 180 pounds!"

☞ **Demands About Others**

"She should treat me better!"

"He should understand how hard this is!"

☞ **Demands About the World/Conditions**

"My doctors should know how to fix me!"

"It isn't fair that I have to deploy!"

Z **Hint:** Look for words such as "***Should***", "***Must***", "***Ought***", and "***Have to***" in order to detect demandingness

2. Awfulizing: Rating the quality of a person (ourselves or others) or events in extreme terms. Often involves words such as "awful" "terrible" or "disaster."

7 *"I can't do anything I enjoy anymore because I'm so tired!"*

7 *"I had a bad day yesterday, this coping stuff must not be working anymore!"*

3. 'I Can't Stand It'-itus: Convincing yourself that you will not be able to tolerate unfortunate or frustrating occurrences.

7 *"If I don't get some relief quickly I'll go crazy!"*

7 *"I'm so tired, how can I be expected to work today?"*

7 *"I can't take another day at this job!"*

4. Faulty Evidence/Assumptions: You accept a belief without considering the evidence against that belief.

7 *"Life would be better if I could just get out of the military."*

7 *"She won't mind if I'm late again."*

7 *"If I just avoid him, he won't be able to yell at me."*

Reassuring Thoughts

IN ORDER TO THINK REALISTICALLY, YOU MUST...

- ☞ Express your thoughts as *preferences* (even strong preferences).
- ☞ Recognize that **most things** are preferences (i.e., things you do not **need** to live).
- ☞ Realize things might not turn out like you would prefer.

For example:

- 4 “I hope today is not so stressful, but if it isn’t, I’ll cope okay. No reason to make myself crazy about it.”
- 4 “I wish my boss was more understanding, but she isn’t. That’s the way she is going to act.”
- 4 “No one can prove that my life *has to be* hassle free, and it is almost certain not to be.”
- 4 “I prefer that life is stress free, but it’s almost certain not to be. I need to focus on managing the stress.”

REASSURING THOUGHTS AVOID AWFULIZING AND I CAN’T STAND IT ITUS. You view things realistically and rationally rather than in exaggerated terms.

- 4 “Having to work here is a real hassle, but it doesn’t have to ruin my life.”
“I’m having trouble learning this new procedure, but I’ve learned this kind of thing in the past. I need to just keep at it.”

REASSURING THOUGHTS CAREFULLY EXAMINE THE EVIDENCE FOR A BELIEF.

- 4 “There are hassles and frustration in civilian jobs also. They are just different.
- 4 “Avoiding problems is only a short term fix. I need to do something about this.”

Remember, Reassuring Thoughts Are REALISTIC Thoughts. They are not unbelievable positive thoughts. Aiming for “Positive Thinking” places you at risk for constructing thoughts that are as unrealistic as alarming beliefs.

EXAMPLES OF UNREALISTIC, POSITIVE THOUGHTS:

- ☞ “Life is fair, I’ll always get what I deserve.”
- ☞ “People will always look out after my best interests.”
- ☞ “Soon I’ll have my life under control and won’t have to think about this stuff anymore.”
- ☞ “I know I’ll be able to make my boss like me and then things will be better.”
- ☞ “Good things always happen to good people.”
- ☞ “This class will finally enable me to get my old life back.”

Changing Alarming Self-Talk

GENERAL QUESTIONS TO CHALLENGE ALARMING THOUGHTS



- ⇒ Am I alarming myself unnecessarily? Can I see this another way?
- ⇒ What am I demanding *must* happen? What do I *want* rather than *need*?
- ⇒ Am I rating something a *catastrophe*? Is it every bit that *awful*?
- ⇒ Am I rating a *type of person*? What is the *action* I don't like?
- ⇒ What's *untrue* about my thoughts? How can I stick to the *facts*?

STRATEGIES TO CHANGE ALARMING EVALUATIONS (AWFULIZING)\

- A. **LISTEN FOR THE EXTREME OR CATASTROPHIC RATING WORDS** (*horrible, terrible, disaster, awful*) of an event. For example, a thought about how things couldn't be worse and how you will not be able to survive the event.
- B. Instead of using this extreme rating when it doesn't fully apply, **THINK OF THE EVENT IN TERMS OF DEGREE OF DISAPPOINTMENT OR INCONVENIENCE**. Other words might better describe the relative severity of the event, such as *annoying, nuisance, irritating, unfortunate, frustration, or problem*.
- C. **LISTEN FOR THE EXTREME OR OVERLY GENERAL RATING OF A PERSON** (*loser, stupid, inconsiderate, pushy, selfish, jerk, incompetent*), something which implies that there are good and bad people in the world and this person definitely is part of the bad group while others (often including ourselves) are in the good group.
- D. **FOCUS YOUR JUDGMENT MORE ON THE SPECIFIC ACTION AS THE PROBLEM** rather than what you believe is the general type of person involved. Realize that you are on shaky ground whenever you think you can fairly and without doubt categorize someone as totally fitting a particular type. It is much more relevant to think in terms of the actions which someone did that you disagree with or you see as mistakes. This pertains to your rating of yourself as well as others.

Examples:

ALARMING EVALUATIONS:

1. I didn't get promoted. They must think I'm no good.
2. My boss is a total idiot.
3. Things just couldn't be worse.

REASSURING EVALUATIONS:

1. Promotions are influenced by a lot of things besides job performance. My boss as told me many times I'm doing a good job.
2. My boss is probably as frustrated as I am with the way things are at work. But, I don't like the way he takes his frustrations out on us. I need to think about how to handle this better.
3. Things can always be worse. Thinking like this will just get me depressed. I need do something I will enjoy to help myself feel better.

STRATEGIES TO CHANGE ALARMING EXPECTATIONS (DEMANDINGNESS)

- 1 Pick out the element of *truth* or the *preference* in your alarming expectation.
- 2 Remove the *absolute demand words* (must, should, need, have to) and replace them with words of *preference* (want to, would like, wish, it would be better if).
- 3 Check that your preference is *reasonable* considering the cost of it to your health, convenience, relationships, or your other priorities.

Examples:

| <i>ALARMING EXPECTATIONS:</i> | <i>REASSURING EXPECTATIONS:</i> |
|---|--|
| 1. I need this problem to be gone now! | 1. I'd like it to be gone, but I can manage it by using the management skills I've been learning. |
| 2. They've got to have a cure for this. | 2. Many medical conditions are incurable, but many people have learned to manage them and enjoy life at the same time. I can too. |
| 3. Those who really care about me will know I'm feeling stressed. | 3. I can't expect them to read my mind. I need to share with them what I'm feeling. Maybe they can help me look at it a little more objectively. |

STRATEGIES TO CHANGE ALARMING PREDICTIONS (I CAN'T STAND IT ITUS & FAULTY EVIDENCE/ASSUMPTIONS)

- 1 Pick out what you see as the alarming scenario.
- 2 Ask yourself, "*What are the odds of this entire scene taking place?*" If it is not really likely, remind yourself of the more probable events.
- 3 Play out what your options could be and how you would like to respond should something like your "what if" scenario take place. Think about what you might have learned from similar situations before.

Examples:

| <i>ALARMING PREDICTIONS:</i> | <i>REASSURING PREDICTIONS:</i> |
|---|---|
| 1. This is more than I can bear. | 1. I sometimes feel overwhelmed, but I can't expect to not have some struggles. I need to keep trying to learn how to cope, even when it's not going as well as I would like. |
| 2. I am doing so badly adhering to my diet, I must have no self-discipline. | 2. It's not just a problem of self-discipline. Problems learning to eat healthy are common and result from lots of different factors. I need to do some problem solving to see if I can get on track. |
| 3. This will never get easier. | 3. Learning new ways of responding to stressful situations is always harder at first. As these changes become a habit they will get much easier to do and stick with. |