

6/Thinking and Choosing

**Can I really control how I think?
Stressful thoughts automatically pop
into my mind. I'm looking for some
simple strategies that can help me
reduce stress by changing how I think.**

**My first thoughts always seem to be
to see the negative side of things.
Can I learn to be more optimistic in
how I think about things?**

**Can I do anything to change how
I respond to stressful events?**

REAL PEOPLE, REAL STORIES

A Wake-Up Call Motivational speaker and author Earl Nightingale relates this story:

Some years ago, a friend of mine played a trick on his wife that changed her life. Over the years, his wife, Karen, had formed the habit of shouting at the children, particularly in the morning. She screamed at them to get up and get dressed, to come to breakfast, to get ready for school, to catch the school bus. This was a scene that no doubt is duplicated in thousands, perhaps millions, of homes every morning.

But it left my friend John and the children with jangled nerves every morning, with a great desire to get as far from the house as possible in the shortest possible time. Each morning, John found himself heaving a sigh of relief as he left the wild confusion and noise of his home for the quiet drive to his office.

On one such drive, John began to think of ways in which this situation could be changed. It was absurd to think that every member of his family had to start each day with an unhappy scene of shouting and confusion. Suddenly he got an idea he thought might work.

Mind is the Master power that molds and makes,
And Man is Mind, and evermore he takes
The tool of Thought, and, shaping what he wills,
Brings forth a thousand joys, a thousand ills: —
He thinks in secret, and it comes to pass:
Environment is but his looking-glass.

—JAMES ALLEN

CHAPTER SIX



The next morning, unbeknownst to Karen, John hid in the kitchen a tape recorder. Throughout the frenetic tableau of shouting and imprecations, the silent machine recorded every word. Then, after the children had left and Karen was sitting limply in her chair with a cup of coffee, catching her breath after her morning drillmaster duties, John played the tape for her.

For a few moments, Karen looked at him in curious amazement. Then she suddenly realized that the strident, shouting, barking, unhappy voice was her own. For the first time, she heard herself as she sounded each morning to her husband and children. Her face flamed in wounded embarrassment as the awful sound of her own voice again filled the kitchen. Long before the tape was over, she put her head in her arms and began to cry.

John turned off the tape recorder and put his arms around her. When she raised her tear-streaked face to look at him, it was filled with resolve. She said quietly, "John, I'll never make another sound like that as long as I live."

The next morning the children were dumbfounded, but delighted. Their mother was smiling happily. She spoke to them in normal tones. After the children, still dazed by the smiling stranger who looked like their mother, had left for school, John and his wife sat and talked over a cup of coffee. She explained that she had been operating on autopilot and needed a wake-up call.

Source: "To See Ourselves," by Earl Nightingale, *Nightingale-Conant's Insight*, 100 (Chicago: Nightingale-Conant Corp., pp. 37-38).

Student Objectives

Study of this chapter will enable you to:

1. Experience and apply a variety of cognitive techniques to prevent unhealthy stress.
2. Distinguish between effective and ineffective ways of responding.
3. Respond to situations in the most effective way that will result in inner peace.
4. Explain how rational thinking differs from irrational thinking.
5. Identify specific types of thought patterns you engage in that have positive or negative effects on your handling of stress.
6. Evaluate how your thinking influences your emotions and stress.

Thinking and Choosing

Do you think your love life is a failure? How about your job? And what about your less-than-perfect body? You probably don't need a psychologist to tell you that what you think creates how you feel. In nearly all situations, the stress you are feeling begins with a thought. This is the bottom line of cognitive therapy. The way you think—your ideas, values, perceptions—all affect your stress level. Your thoughts shape the events and circumstances of your life. Thoughts relieve stress and, moreover, can result in extraordinary life changes.

Cognitive (thinking) techniques can transform stress-producing thought patterns into thought patterns that actually prevent stress. In the preceding chapter you were introduced to concepts related to cognitive restructuring, including perception and control. In this chapter you will learn a variety of cognitive techniques, from simple to challenging, that you can use to change how you view the events and situations in your life. These techniques help you reduce stress mentally by showing how your mind contributes to every stressful event you experience. You will learn simple techniques such as thought-stopping and power language. Four additional, detailed remedies for faulty thinking that will be explained are conditioned-response, levels of responding, rational emotive behavior therapy, and the ABCDE technique.

Cognitive Distortions

What are some common ways of thinking that tend to give rise to stress in the first place? The term *cognitive distortion* was introduced in Chapter 5. Cognitive distortion occurs when thoughts are magnified out of proportion to their seriousness, resulting in excess stress. You might have the habit of magnifying negative thoughts. If you do, you are not alone. Many people who react strongly to mental stress find they have developed self-destructive

Believing What You Are Told

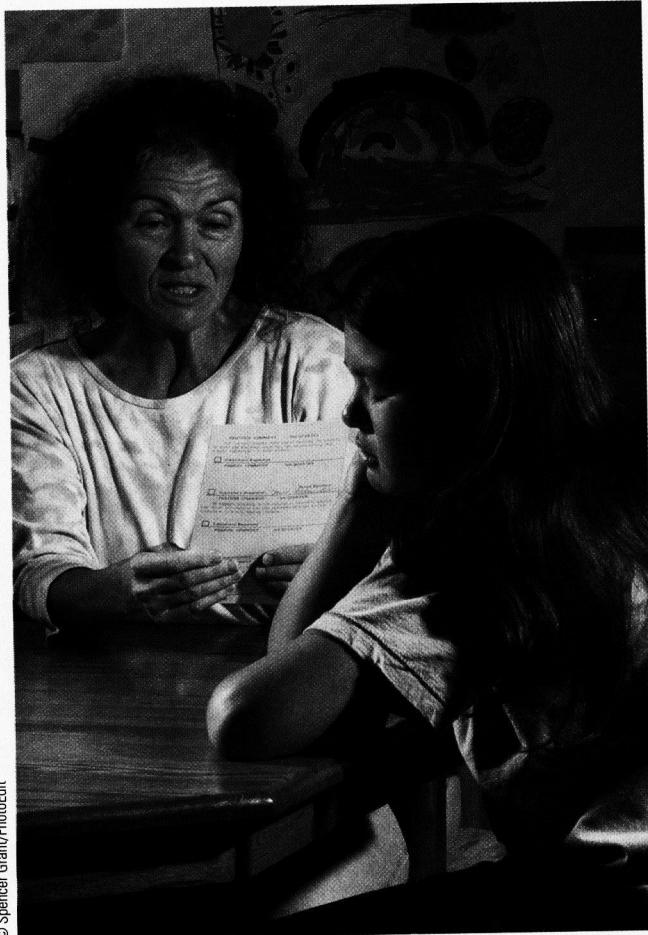
In a study that observed parent-child interactions over several days, researchers found that, on average, there were 400 negative comments for every positive one spoken to each child. The researchers concluded that negative thinking may be a learned response that can be carried into adulthood.

Source: *Self-Esteem and Peak Performance*, by J. Canfield (Nyack, NY: Vantage Communications, 1988).

thought patterns. Inspirational speaker Zig Zigler calls this stinkin' thinkin'—which is quite descriptive. This negative thinking can turn everyday events into plagues of anxiety. See if any of these relate to you.

- **All-or-nothing thinking.** You either did the work perfectly or you totally messed up. Everything is seen as an extreme (good or bad), so there is no middle ground. *Example:* "I can't believe I blew that test. I'm a terrible student."
- **Personalizing.** This is the tendency to assume responsibility for things that are out of your control. Personalizing can lead to feelings of needless guilt. You constantly ask yourself, "What did I do wrong?" The answer might be *nothing*. *Example:* "Brad walked right by my desk this morning without saying hello. I must have made him mad."
- **Discounting the positive.** Are you the type of person who cannot accept a compliment? Many people feel they are undeserving of praise. *Example:* You played a great ballgame or performed well in an artistic endeavor. Afterward, someone compliments you on your performance. Rather than saying "Thank you," you respond, "It was pure luck" or "It was nothing."
- **Assuming the worst.** Some people think they know what others are thinking or how things will turn out—and it's never good. This is also called **pessimism** or **awfulizing**. The awfulizer predicts disaster and lives as if it is inevitable. Awfulizers spend much of their life feeling upset. *Example:* "I think that guy is staring at me. He must think I'm weird-looking." This thought is quickly followed by, "I'm the ugliest person I know."

Distortions in thinking often lead to feelings that are associated with stress. Learning to think in new ways is an outcome of cognitive therapy. **Cognitive therapy** is intended to focus on cognitive distortions and relearning thought processes as a way to alter negative emotions, to raise self-esteem, and to gain hope for the future. Cognitive therapy has been used with groups as well as with individuals. Here is what one student reported after participating in cognitive therapy to help her deal with stress: "I've been doing outstanding. Not every day is good. But now I know that if one thing goes wrong, I don't have to have a bad day; I can have a bad moment." Cognitive therapy can be a remedy for both distorted thinking and more serious disorders such as depression.



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Thinking Errors

Psychologist Albert Ellis identified 12 irrational ideas, similar to distorted thinking, that he calls thinking errors. These ideas, commonly found in our culture, are inaccurate and irrational, and they contribute to some of the stress-related problems you learned about in Chapter 4. The beliefs and conditioned responses often take the form of absolute statements. Instead of responding with a preference or a desire, we make unqualified demands on others or convince ourselves that we have overwhelming needs. Ellis also presents disputing ideas that successfully counter the irrational ones. These new ideas allow us to move forward with confidence and without unreasonable stress and anxiety.

Reflect carefully on Ellis' 12 irrational ideas and decide which three relate the most to your way of thinking. We all practice irrational thinking to some degree. Think of personal examples that demonstrate this thinking. Think about the related rational disputing idea and how you could integrate this new way of thinking.

Making a conscious effort to change or reframe the way you think or to focus on the positive thought is an important element in stress management. Eliminating "stinkin' thinkin'" involves first awareness, and then correction, of these erroneous thoughts. The goal is to create positive feelings of challenge rather than negative feelings of stress. Implementing cognitive techniques can help get you started.

Negative thinking can be a learned response resulting from negative comments children hear every day.

Cognitive Therapy for PTSD

There is evidence that cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) can be effective in phobias and obsessive compulsive disorder. This study shows that intensive CBT may also be effective for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A feasibility study tested the acceptability and efficacy of an intensive version of cognitive therapy for PTSD (CT-PTSD). **RESULTS:** Intensive CT-PTSD was well tolerated, and 85.7 % of patients no longer had PTSD at

the end of treatment. Patients treated with intensive CT-PTSD achieved overall outcomes similar to a comparable group of patients treated with weekly CT-PTSD in an earlier study. However, the intensive treatment improved PTSD symptoms over a shorter period of time and led to greater reductions in depression.

Source: "Intensive Cognitive Therapy for PTSD: A Feasibility Study," by A. Ehlers, D. M. Clark, A. Hackmann, N. Grey, S. Liness, J. Wild, J. Manley, L. Waddington, and F. McManus, *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 38(4) (2010): 383-398.

12 Irrational Ideas That Create and Add to Stress

1. **Irrational idea:** I must be loved by everyone and everyone must approve of everything I do.
Rational disputing idea: I can't possibly please everyone. I will be true to my own values, as I strive to be loving, creative, and productive. Others may like me, or they may not, but I choose not to be anxious about their opinions of me.
2. **Irrational idea:** Certain acts are awful or wicked, and people who perform such acts should be severely punished.
Rational disputing idea: People's poor behaviors do not make them rotten individuals. There are things that others do that I wouldn't. But they are not bad people. Blaming and punishing does little, if any, good and often can be harmful. People usually do what they feel is the best thing to do in most situations. This applies both to me and to everyone else. I can allow for that.
3. **Irrational idea:** It is horrible when things are not the way I like them to be.
Rational disputing idea: Many different things happen in the world. It is not possible for all of them to be to everyone's liking. I can accept that the things that take place might never be exactly the way I would like them to be. That's just how life is.
4. **Irrational idea:** Human misery and unhappiness are always externally caused and are forced on me by outside people and events.
Rational disputing idea: Most, if not all, unhappiness I experience is not caused by the unpleasant aspects of the events of life but is created internally by the things I say to myself about those events. I may be able to control parts of external events, but I can control all of my internal responses to those events. That part is mine to choose.
5. **Irrational idea:** If something is or may be dangerous or fearsome, I should be terribly upset and endlessly obsess about it.
Rational disputing idea: I cannot control or prevent events from happening in the world. Worrying about them will not positively affect them in any way. Strangely, most of the things I worry about don't happen anyway. If an unpleasant event does happen, I'll approach it realistically, deal with it appropriately, and move on.
6. **Irrational idea:** It is easier to avoid difficulties and responsibilities in life than to face them.
Rational disputing idea: I can face my problems squarely and solve them to the best of my ability. An enjoyable life is not one without problems; it is one where I meet challenges and successfully overcome them.
7. **Irrational idea:** I absolutely need something or someone stronger or greater than me, on whom I must rely, to succeed.
Rational disputing idea: I easily take appropriate risks and trust that my skills and abilities will rise to the surface to help me succeed. I enjoy other people in my life, but I have no complete need for anyone.
8. **Irrational idea:** I should be thoroughly competent, intelligent, and achieving in all possible respects.
Rational disputing idea: I don't need to be perfect in everything. In fact, it is impossible to be truly perfect at anything because there's always room for improvement. I will strive for achievement and accomplishment. I will make mistakes, and that's okay. I will learn from those and move on.
9. **Irrational idea:** Because something once strongly affected my life in the past, it must determine my present and future behavior; the influence of the past cannot be overcome.

(continues)

When one door closes,
another door opens: but
we often look so long and
so regretfully upon the
closed door.

— ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL

Rational disputing idea: I can certainly learn from my past experiences, but I don't need to be overly attached to or prejudiced by them. The past does not equal the future. I am not the same person I was before. I am constantly changing. I can choose to see things in a different light.

- 10. Irrational idea:** I must have certain and perfect control over things.

Rational disputing idea: The world is full of probability and chance, and I can still enjoy life despite this. Because I can't control most of what happens around me, I might as well flow with it instead. I choose to let go and flow.

- 11. Irrational idea:** Human happiness can be achieved by inertia and inaction.

Rational disputing idea: I am happiest when I am venturing out of my comfort zones to practice creative pursuits and devote myself to people or projects outside of myself.

- 12. Irrational idea:** I have virtually no control over my emotions; I am their victim and cannot do anything about how I feel when things happen.

Rational disputing idea: I do have control over my emotions. I am responsible for how I feel, and I always choose the emotion that I experience based on my own thoughts about what is happening.

Source: "The Essence of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT): A Comprehensive Approach to Treatment," by Albert Ellis; Albert Ellis Institute | REBT Workshops | CBT Workshops. Web. 16 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.rebt.org>>.

Cognitive Techniques That Help Overcome Distorted Thinking

Some helpful cognitive techniques include positive self-talk, thought-stopping, power language, and going with the flow.

Positive Self-Talk Self-talk describes the messages you send to yourself, that is, your internal dialogue. This flow of thoughts, sometimes called **stream of consciousness**, often determines how you interpret events in your life. Becoming aware of this stream of consciousness and listening to what you are thinking is the first step in mastering your self-talk. Many of us don't even realize how often our self-talk is negative. Our brain thinks faster than we can talk, so if we are in the habit of thinking negatively, these thoughts will enter the mind so quickly that we may not even be aware of them. Becoming aware of your self-talk is the first step to mastering it.

Stress Busting Behavior

THINK RIGHT!

Follow these tips to change your mindset and reduce your level of stress. Check all that you already follow or that you are committed to trying.

- Accept shades of gray.** Just because something is not perfect doesn't mean that it's terrible.
- Don't take it personally.** Sometimes things go wrong. Sometimes people don't like you. That's normal, and it doesn't mean that there's anything wrong with you.
- Accentuate the positive.** Play up the good aspects of your life and your achievements; downplay the negative aspects and the mistakes.
- Accept compliments.** Don't deny that you deserve the praise; just say thank you!
- Assume the best.** Think positively about your current situation and the future.
- See the best in other people.** Assume that they have good reasons for what they do, even if you think they are misguided. Give people the benefit of the doubt.
- Refuse to worry.** Do your best to achieve a positive outcome, but then be ready to accept whatever life has in store for you. Whatever will be, will be, and worrying doesn't help!
- Believe in your ability to control your emotions.** You get to choose how you feel in response to what happens in your life.

Silver or Bronze?

Three research psychologists published an article demonstrating that what you think affects how you feel. They observed Olympic silver and bronze medal winners as they stood on the podium receiving their medals and they rated them according to how happy they appeared to be. Who do you think looked happier: the silver or the bronze winners?

The findings may surprise you. The bronze winners, even though they had performed worse than the silvers, appeared happier. The researchers found that the silver medal winners tended to compare themselves up to the gold medal winners, thinking, "If only I'd been a second faster, I'd be the best in the world. Now, I'm a loser." The bronze medalists, on the other hand, tended to compare themselves to all the rest of the competitors. They were thrilled to be on the podium when they could easily have been just one of the many competitors.

How you feel depends upon what you say to yourself, especially when comparing yourself to others. So next time you're stressed about how little money you have, or how your car is about to fall apart, think bronze and be thankful for what you have. According to the research, it's good psychology.*



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Bronze Olympic medal winners appear happier than silver medal winners. Researchers found that silver medalists felt like losers because they tended to compare themselves to the gold medal winners. Bronze medalists were thrilled to be on the podium, realizing they could have been one of the many competitors not to medal. How you think about an experience greatly impacts the resulting feelings.

Sources: "Are Smiles a Sign of Happiness? Gold Medal Winners at the Olympic Games," by F. Dols, J. Ruiz-Belda, and M. Angeles, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(6) (1995): 1113, 7.

* "Winning a Bronze Medal May Be Better in the Race for Happiness," by S. Brody, *Los Angeles Times*, 2004.

Much of the internal dialogue in the mind is a result of habit. Because we are used to thinking in certain ways, changing this pattern may be challenging. You can learn to manage your self-talk by becoming more aware of the things you say to yourself. Do you tend to put yourself down?

- "I'm too fat. No one thinks I'm cute."
- "I'm late again. I can't get anywhere on time."
- "If I weren't such an awful parent, Jeff wouldn't have turned to alcohol."
- "I'm too stupid. I'll never pass this math course."

Negative self-talk is largely habitual. With frequent repetition of any negative judgment about ourselves, we begin to believe it. Once you become aware of your self-talk, consciously shift negative thoughts to positive. Try talking to yourself like you would to a friend you care about.

- "I have a lot to offer in a relationship."
- "I'm a smart and capable person. Tomorrow I'll leave early enough to get to work on time."
- "Even though Jeff has made some poor choices, I've always been a loving parent."
- "I'll have to work hard, but I've successfully passed other tough classes and I can pass this class, too."
- "I love challenges and opportunities."
- "I make time for family and friends."
- "I give my best effort, and that is good enough."
- "Exercise is a time for me to get stronger and reflect on life."

Here is an example to demonstrate the impact self-talk can have on stress. See if you can relate to Joe's experience.

Joe has just received his final grade in chemistry, and he is furious. He was only

 **TIME TIP**

"One of the best things that I have learned to do that has made such a tremendous difference for me is simply stopping and asking myself this very cool question: 'What is the most valuable use of my time right now?' All too often I find myself just spending time doing useless things like watching television or worrying about all the things that I have to do. But when I ask that question, a good answer usually comes to my mind that lets me know what I need to be doing right now."

—Cheryl C.

one point away from receiving a B, and a C has now blown his GPA. He can hardly believe that his rigid teacher will not cut him some slack and give him one point to raise his grade. He is also mad at himself. “I’m so stupid. I slept in one day and missed a quiz that ended up ruining my grade.” Joe is stressed and angry.

Joe could choose to think about this situation in a more positive way to reduce his stress. His grade will remain the same either way, but the way he feels will be different. “I’m disappointed that I earned a C in chemistry, but that’s what I got. I learned a lot about the importance of attending every class and turning in all my assignments. I won’t make the mistake again of missing class, especially when my grades are this important. I’ll raise my GPA next semester, and I know I can do it.”

Think about a recent experience when you felt angry or frustrated. Then describe your self-talk during that experience. Now try rethinking the whole situation using positive self-talk.

Positive self-talk can improve self-esteem and eliminate the chronic, nagging stress that destroys people from the inside out. Remember, your thoughts generate your feelings. Thinking negative thoughts about yourself affects your self-esteem. The results are negative, stress-producing emotions such as guilt, anger, anxiety, and fear. Conversely, thinking positively about these learning experiences affects your self-esteem similarly, but in a positive way. As a result, your stress-reducing emotions are positive, including happiness, peace of mind, confidence, and self-control. Mental health professionals promote the conscious use of positive self-talk as a powerful force for changing the way individuals think, feel, and act.

Thought-Stopping **Thought-stopping** is just what it sounds like—stopping negative thoughts when they enter your stream of consciousness. When an unconstructive thought creeps into your mind, you can recognize your choice to think, and say “Stop!” In doing so, you replace the stress-producing, negative statement with a positive statement. The key to success is to believe the positive statement. Although this may take some practice, you actually can change the way you think.

Suppose you start to think, “I’ll never be able to learn how to use this computer. I’m too old.” Say, “Stop!” and replace the negative, stress-producing thought with, “I’ve learned difficult things before. I can do this.” This simple technique works in part because it increases awareness. Consciously analyzing the thoughts that pass through your mind brings greater awareness to the messages those thoughts contain. Thought-stopping also brings an immediate end to negative messages and the resulting emotions that follow faulty thinking.

Because what we say is a result of what we think, you also can apply this technique to what you speak. Ask friends and family to help by saying, “Stop your negative self-talk” when they hear you putting yourself down. Before long you will be acutely aware of negative-talking.

The outcome of positive self-talk and thought-stopping is **learned optimism**. Psychologist Martin Seligman explains, “We have a choice about how we think. Optimism is a learned set of skills. Once learned, these skills persist because they feel so good to use.” Seligman contends that by learning to challenge automatic negative thoughts that enter our brains and asserting our own statements of self-worth, we can transform ourselves into **optimists** who see what is right rather than **pessimists** who forever focus on what is wrong.¹

Power Language **Power language** is a way of speaking that helps you boost your feeling of control simply by changing the words you use. Words can create a feeling of powerlessness or a feeling of control. Compare these two statements:

“I can’t handle this deadline.” “I won’t handle this deadline.”

“I won’t” is a choice you make—an act of will—resulting in a sense of control rather than helplessness. You are no longer the helpless victim of the events around you.

Author and lecturer Anthony Robbins said, “Simply by changing your habitual vocabulary—the words you consistently use to describe the emotions of your life—you can instantaneously change how you think, how you feel, and how you live.”² He suggests making slight adjustments to our internal conversations with examples like those shown in Table 6.1.

As you can see, the words you use to describe your emotions will have a noticeable effect on how you feel. You do have the power to change how you feel by changing the words you use.

Going with the Flow **Going with the flow** or accepting situations we cannot control is a cognitive technique that we sometimes overlook. Maybe we tend to overlook acceptance because it can be difficult. Psychologist Robert Eliot says, “If you can’t fight it or flee it . . .

TABLE 6.1 Transforming Negative Internal Conversations into Positive Conversations

Confused	transforms into	Curious
Failure	transforms into	Learning
Angry	transforms into	Disenchanted
Furious	transforms into	Passionate
Hurt	transforms into	Bothered
I hate	transforms into	I prefer
Lonely	transforms into	Available
Overwhelmed	transforms into	Many opportunities
Rejected	transforms into	Misunderstood
Stressed	transforms into	Energized

Source: *Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical, and Financial Destiny*, by A. Robbins (New York: Summit Books, 1991).

flow with it,” an idea which is expressed eloquently in the *Serenity Prayer*, widely credited to St. Francis of Assisi:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Consider the metaphor of the bamboo plant and the grass reed. When it is full-grown, the bamboo plant stands tall and stiff. The grass reed similarly grows tall but has more flexibility in its shaft. When the fierce winds come, the bamboo tries its best to continue standing tall and strong, resisting the force of the wind. But the power of the wind snaps the long shaft from the lower parts of the plant. The reeds encounter the same stiff wind. They simply bend and flow as the wind pushes them around violently. In the end, after the winds have calmed, the reeds have survived. They flowed with the circumstances they could not control and emerged better off than the bamboo. The resistance of the bamboo plant is the cause of its demise.

What Else Can I do?

Turn Needs into Preferences

Our basic physical needs are air, food, water, and maintaining an appropriate body temperature. All the other things in life are things we simply want but don’t necessarily have to have. Downgrade your needs to preferences, and release your attachment to the things you think you need but really just want. Instead of saying, “I need,” say, “I want.” Say “I choose to” instead of “I have to.” Notice how differently you feel when you speak to yourself this way.

Underlying Theories and Practices

Becoming increasingly aware of how you think and then implementing techniques to replace stress-producing thought patterns can have a great impact on how you feel. Positive self-talk, thought-stopping, power language, and going with the flow are tools to develop a stress-relieving thinking pattern. Now that you have some tools for improving your thinking, we

Research HIGHLIGHT

Going with the Flow

For his master’s thesis at California State University-Long Beach, Ryan Pittsinger, a lifetime surfer, surveyed 107 surfers after a 30-minute session in the waves and found that positivity and tranquility increased significantly, while negative mood and fatigue decreased. Pittsinger used his findings in his work with an “ocean therapy” program to help at-risk youth. The program combines surf instruction with discussions to help participants apply the principles of surfing—like confidence and trust—to their everyday lives. “You have no control over the conditions,” Pittsinger says, “so you’re forced to deal with what you get.”

Source: “Catch Some Waves.” by M. Kim, *U.S. News & World Report*, December 2010, 147(11) p. 63.



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Ride the waves. Just as in surfing, sometimes going with the flow and accepting what we cannot change results in the smoothest ride.

will look in more detail at some underlying theories and therapies that help explain stressful thinking. Conditioned-response, levels of responding, rational emotive behavior therapy, and the ABCDE technique provide a better understanding of how to prevent stressful thinking.

Conditioned-response One theory that describes why people make the choices they do has at its core the well-known concepts of stimulus-response and conditioning. This **conditioned-response theory** proposes that when things happen in our environment, we are conditioned to respond in certain ways.

In the 1890s, Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov conducted a series of experiments dealing with salivation responses in dogs. He would introduce a stimulus of food to a dog, and immediately the dog would begin to salivate. This is a natural response: Salivation helps the dog digest food.

Pavlov then introduced a sound (he used various sounds such as whistles and tuning forks) simultaneously when he introduced the food. With the introduction of that paired stimulus—the food and the sound—the dog still responded with salivation. Finally, Pavlov introduced the sound but without the presence of the food. He found that the dog was conditioned to salivate to the sound because it associated the sound with the food. When the food was not present, the dog still salivated. This, and other similar studies, became the basis for our understanding of why people sometimes react the way they do.

Most experts agree that people are conditioned to a large extent. We respond to stimuli in our environment in learned ways that are almost automatic. For example, we tend to eat at certain times of the day. In the United States, we drive our cars on the right side of the road rather than the left. Most of us sleep during the night and are awake during the day. When the telephone rings, we pick up the receiver expecting to talk with someone. These are all learned behaviors, and many of them serve us well—for example, driving on the same side of the road. Having to relearn the mechanics of driving a car every time we want to go somewhere would be tiresome and inconvenient. Not having to think about many of the things we do is helpful.

Some other patterns of behavior (conditioned responses) that we perform automatically do not serve us quite so well. For example, if someone yells obscenities at us, we likely will get angry, offended, and defensive. When we are driving behind someone who quickly cuts in front of us, we probably will get frustrated or upset at that person. When we are sitting in a class or a meeting and the speaker goes on and on in a monotonous tone, we will tend to get impatient or bored. These are conditioned or learned responses. They are not inherited tendencies. We do not have angry, bored, or easily offended genes. We are not programmed from birth to automatically respond in that way.

In the chapter opening story about Karen and John, Karen's surprise when she heard herself on the tape recorder indicates that she had become conditioned to react to the morning demands in a predictable way without much thought or awareness on her part. She reacted by yelling at her family. The result was stress and pressure on Karen and her family.

This conditioned response is like an elephant that gets trained for the circus. The trainer puts a huge clamp around one of the elephant's legs as soon as it is able to walk. Attached to this clamp is a chain. At the other end of this chain is a pole to which the chain is attached. The trainer teaches the elephant to walk in circles around this pole. After several weeks of this training (conditioning), the elephant comes to believe that whenever it has a clamp around its leg, it can go only so far away from the pole. You could tie a flimsy string from the clamp to the pole and this big, strong elephant would still remain in the circle. It has been conditioned to accept its limitations.

In much the same way, we tend to grow attached to our beliefs. As a result, we limit ourselves to our own self-made borders. These ways of responding are learned behaviors. This is both good news and bad news. The bad news is that we did it to ourselves. For example, when we are offended by someone else's words or behavior, the truth is that the other person does not have the power to offend us. Instead, we make the choice to be offended. Our own thoughts about what the person says or does are what make us feel offended. We decide how we interpret what is happening and the feelings we get from that experience.

The good news is that if we learned to respond in a certain way to something that happens, we can unlearn it. We can remove that way of responding from our thoughts and behaviors. We are not stuck to any pattern of conditioned behavior. We can retrain ourselves to respond in ways that will be more productive and less stressful.

Choice As conscious and aware human beings, we have the capacity to place something between the stimulus and the response, which will immediately put us in control of how that situation will affect us. That important element is *choice*. In any situation, we have the power to choose our response to what is happening. We do not automatically have to react with anger toward the person who is yelling at us. We have a choice in the matter, and we can choose a different reaction. We can choose to return this person's anger with our own, or to remain calm, or to turn and walk away. Just because the driver in front of us quickly swerves doesn't mean we have to respond with irritation. We can choose to ignore the driver. Or we can choose to respond with kindness.

Or we can choose to smile and wave. It really is our choice. As Master Yoda, the *Star Wars* character, appropriately said, "We can unlearn what we have learned."

Choosing to respond in a way that is different from how we are conditioned can be challenging, and it requires deliberate intent. But it can be done. One of the most profound examples of being responsible (response-able) is that of Victor Frankl, a prisoner of war in the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, he tells how he came to realize that, regardless of what his Nazi captors did to him, he had the total and complete choice of how to respond. He reached the following conclusion:

The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples—often of a heroic nature—which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom—of independence of mind—even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. We, who lived in concentration camps, can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing. The one thing that can never be taken away is the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.³

Frankl's message is that whenever we are upset, angry, bored, nervous, anxious, embarrassed, shy, or experience any other emotion, it stems from our thoughts, not the event that is happening. Rather than blame the teacher for the boring feelings you have during class, or pin your rage on that driver who cuts in front of you, you have a choice in how to react.

James Allen made the following statement more than 100 years ago, and it still rings true:

Man is made or unmade by himself; in the armory of thought, he forges the weapons by which he destroys himself. He also fashions the tools with which he builds for himself heavenly mansions of joy and strength and peace. By the right choice and true application of thought, man ascends to the Divine Perfection; by the abuse and wrong application of thought, he descends below the level of the beast. Between these two extremes are all the grades of character and man is their maker and master.⁴

What Else Can I do?

Make more mistakes! In reality, there are no such things as failures, only outcomes. You decide whether you failed at something. When you have done something you feel was a mistake, learn from it. There is no point in getting upset over it. Time has passed and you can't undo what happened. The only valuable thing that you can do with that which has passed is learn the lesson the experience is giving to you, make amends where appropriate, and choose differently next time.

No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.

—ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

Levels of Responding Things happen over which we have absolutely no control. We can do nothing to affect their progression or outcome. Typical examples or circumstances are natural occurrences, other people's actions, and world events that we view on television. When we notice these uncontrollable events, we have a tendency to react before we think about how we are reacting. We are on autopilot.

For example, a person is eating lunch at a restaurant. The server brings him some food and a drink. As the server hands the man his drink, it spills on his lap. This is an event that has happened, and he can do nothing to undo the spill. His tendency may be to become angry. But he could react differently, and how he reacts will affect his emotional state and his stress level.

Even though individuals respond to events in a variety of ways, we can categorize how people respond to uncontrollable events in two broad categories:

1. Effective responding
2. Ineffective responding

TABLE 6.2 Levels of Responding

Usefulness	Degree of Inner Peace	Ways We Respond to Events	Sounds Like (what we say to ourselves)	How We Feel—What We Get: Our Resulting Emotional State
Effective Leads to feelings associated with relaxation	More Peace	Gratitude	I appreciate . . .	Joy, serenity, contentment
		Allowance/Acceptance	It's okay . . . I embrace . . . I can live with this . . . I can go with the flow	Peace, release, relaxation, freedom
		Discovery	I wonder . . . What would happen if . . . ? What can I learn from this?	Inquisitiveness, curiosity, growth
		Observation	I am noticing . . .	Calm
Ineffective Leads to feelings associated with stress	Less Peace	Resistance/Complaining	I wish things were different (complaining)	Boredom, fatigue, anger
		Judgment/Criticism/Blaming	This is really a /He is really a (insert a negative noun) . . .	Guilt, shame, low self-worth, false pride
		Attachment/Rightness	This <i>must</i> be a certain way . . . Use words like <i>must</i> , <i>have to</i> , <i>need to</i> , <i>should have</i>	Mistrust, anxiety, anger, disappointment

These responses are designated as effective or ineffective based on whether they result in feelings associated with relaxation, such as joy, peace of mind, balance, growth, and happiness, or whether they result in emotions such as anger, fear, frustration, imbalance, boredom, and chaos.

Within those two categories, seven subcategories of **levels of responding** help clarify the best ways to respond: gratitude, allowance/acceptance, discovery, observation, resistance, judgment, and attachment. Table 6.2 shows the ways we typically respond to situations we can't control and the results we get when we respond in those ways.

Let's explore each way of responding beginning with the least effective and moving to the most effective response. To help clarify the differences in the levels of responding, we will relate each category to a situation in which a person, Jenny, finds herself but doesn't have much control in changing. She is waiting in a long line to buy tickets to an upcoming concert. The line is outdoors and rain is starting to fall. She has been in the line quite a while and the line is moving slowly. Further, she has a class in 30 minutes, for which she will be late if the line doesn't move any faster. To get the tickets, she must be the one who pays for them when it comes to her turn, but that will not be happening soon. Jenny simply has to wait in line. Let's consider how her possible responses to the situation will affect how she feels about what is happening. We will begin with the ineffective levels of responding.

Attachment/Rightness Attachment/rightness occurs when we clutch emotionally to ideas, concepts, or situations. When we become emotionally attached to ideas and situations, we think that we know what is best and cling emotionally to that view. We carry the attitude that we are *right* and that *we* know what is best for us or someone else. When we attach ourselves to opinions, to ideas, and to how we think things "ought to be," we find ourselves in arguments; we mistrust people who do not think as we do; and we are disappointed when our expectations aren't met. People who respond with attachment to events tend to become quickly anxious, angry, and fearful. Their need to be *right* supersedes their desire to be happy. When things aren't as they *ought to be*, they get angry and tense. They translate being wrong to a loss of self-esteem.

In our scenario, Jenny feels that the line to buy tickets should be moving faster. She processes in her mind thoughts that might sound like this: "If these people knew what they were doing, they would have made several lines—and done it inside where it isn't raining!" Jenny feels things should be different than they are. As a result of this way of thinking, Jenny will generate feelings associated with stress.

Judgment/Criticism/Blaming Judgment, criticism, and blaming describe the mental act of putting a label on something and then trying to make that label the reality. People who react in this way tend to judge, criticize, and blame things, people, circumstances, and

situations. For example, blaming the server who spilled the drink at the restaurant as "sloppy" or "clumsy" would be an ineffective way of responding for a number of reasons.

First, we have no possible way of accurately judging a situation or a person based on limited experiences. Consider how many life experiences every one of us has had from the first moment of consciousness to the present moment. Every one of those life experiences has had some impact on our current behaviors and decisions. We cannot capture the essence of every one of those life experiences and confine them into an accurate moment of judgment or criticism.

Second, when we judge, we essentially have closed off other possible ways of seeing that person or situation. When we label someone we know who is careful with money as a "tightwad," we limit our ability to see him as economical or frugal.

Third, the act of judging is a mental process in which we are elevating our worth to a higher level than the person we are judging. When we call a thrifty person "penny-pincher," we are saying to ourselves that we are better than she is because of her obvious flaw that has to be pointed out.

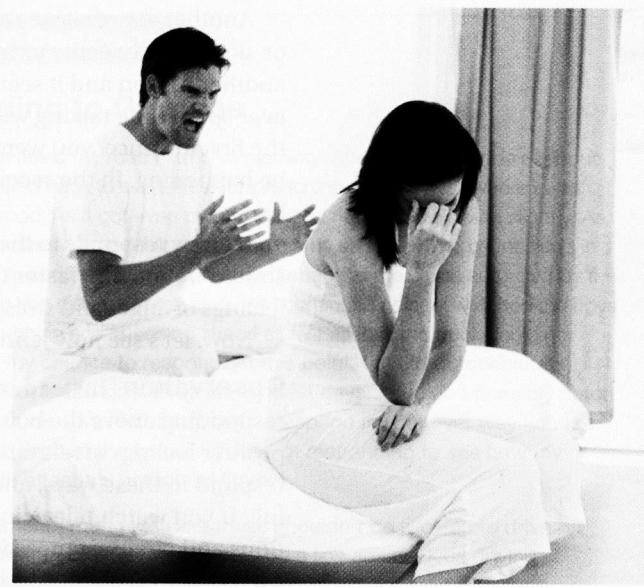
Our judgments of others may reflect our own feelings of inadequacy. In reality, no one has more worth than anyone else. People who have the highest self-esteem tend to be complimentary of others. They do everything possible to try to build up other people because they realize, perhaps unconsciously, that they do not have a need to inflate their own self-esteem artificially by putting someone else down. Responding judgmentally or critically to situations results in feelings of guilt, shame, low self-worth, and false pride.

If Jenny responds with judgment, criticism, or blaming, she might say things about the situation that sound something like, "Those idiots! They don't have the slightest idea what they're doing." As you can imagine, calling the ticket sellers names is ineffective in improving the situation and likely will serve only to escalate Jenny's stress.

Resistance/Complaining Resistance is the mental process of wishing things were different than they are. The problem is that frequently things cannot be different than they are. Many things are completely out of our control and happen as they do. But resistance says that we wish things were otherwise. Resistance is demonstrated in saying to yourself, "I'm in this situation, but I wish I were somewhere else right now." But here *is* where you are, and this *is* what is happening. Wishing otherwise just adds to levels of stress. We can notice if we are resisting what is happening in several ways.

One obvious resistance factor is *anger*. When we are angry, we are saying that something is not happening according to our expectations. The subject of anger is treated more thoroughly in Chapter 8.

Another way to determine resistance is if we are bored or tired. *Boredom* is the emotion that results from thoughts of, "I wish this were happening differently." As an example, when we are bored while listening to someone, we are resisting what the person is saying or how he is saying it. We are wishing that he would speak in a different way or do something else.



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Resistance means wishing things were different than they are.

CULTURE Connection A Taoist Perspective on Resisting

Chuang Tzu, one of the great Taoist writers, told this witty story of what sometimes happens to a person who wishes things were different than they are.

There was a man who was so disturbed by the sight of his own shadow and so displeased with his own footsteps that he determined to get rid of both. The method he hit upon was to run away from them. So he got up and ran. But every time he put his foot down, there was another step, while his

shadow kept up with him without the slightest difficulty. He attributed his failure to the fact that he was not running fast enough. So he ran faster and faster, without stopping, until he finally dropped dead. He failed to realize that if he merely stepped into the shade, his shadow would vanish, and if he sat down and stayed still, there would be no more footsteps.

Source: *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, by T. Merton (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1965), p. 155.

Another way that we can tell when we are resisting something is by noticing how rapidly or slowly *time* seems to be moving. Have you ever spent a few short minutes talking with another person and it seemed like the conversation would never end? Conversely, have you ever spent time talking with someone and before you knew it, several hours had passed? In the first instance, you were resisting the experience. You didn't want what was happening to be happening. In the second instance, you were completely allowing what was happening to happen.

If Jenny responds to the slow ticket line with resistance—if she says to herself that this line should be moving faster than it is (which isn't reality)—time will seem to drag by. Jenny's feelings of anger and stress will fester as a result.

Now, let's see how Jenny might choose to respond more effectively.

Observation Instead of these negative ways of responding, more positive responses—responding above the bold line in table 6.2—are effective because they automatically lead to positive feelings of relaxation, well-being, calm, and inner peace. We are not always trained to respond in these ways, and we may lack role models who demonstrate this type of responding. If you watch television shows such as *Jerry Springer*, the way people respond to situations and circumstances is almost entirely below the line. Many people are taught, from an early age, to exchange blow for blow, to give others "what they deserve," to react negatively. Responding above the line involves a shift in awareness toward a conscious focus on choice rather than reacting by habit and conditioning.

The first positive response, observation, is the simple act of noticing something without adding anything. Our senses bring us data from the outside world, and we simply become aware. We might respond by saying something like, "Hmm . . ." or "I'm noticing or observing . . ." (whatever my senses bring into my awareness). We are taking in the information that presents itself. We are not adding anything more. This is how we function when we are being mindful, as you will learn in Chapter 7. Initially this may sound strange or ineffective. What is the value in spending our moments remarking on what we are noticing?

In our example, if Jenny is responding by observing, her thinking goes something like this, "Hmm . . . I'm noticing that this line isn't moving very fast and I might not arrive at my class on time." She does not add any emotion. She simply observes *what is*. With this attitude, Jenny is able to remain calm. The value of responding by simply observing has tremendous power in keeping us free of stress.

Discovery Discovery is based on observation and adds the additional component of learning, of seeking to understand—of discovery. When we respond in this way, we become like the artist, the poet, or the scientist. We observe what is happening, and we seek to find out what we can learn from it. We focus on how this can add to the enjoyment of our experience of the present moment rather than hinder or act as an obstacle. At this level of responding, we live in the questioning mode.

Taking this approach, Jenny would maintain an attitude of playful discovery that might sound like this: "I wonder what cool things I can notice about the other people who are in this line." "How many boys are in this line compared to girls?" "How many are blond, brunette, redhead, or bald?" "What can I learn about this experience so next time I'm not waiting in a line making myself late for class?" "If I look up at the clouds, perhaps I can tell how long this rain will last." Imagine how much better standing in this line will be for Jenny if she has thoughts that are in the discovery mode of responding. This way of thinking will not generate stressful thoughts and emotions.

Allowance/Acceptance Allowance and acceptance occur when we emotionally embrace what is happening as the way things are and we are okay with them. We are essentially saying "yes" to *what is*. Acceptance says we allow and even embrace what is happening. Acceptance is realizing that what is happening is how it is and it isn't any other way—and that is okay.

To acquire knowledge,
one must study; but to
acquire wisdom, one must
observe.

—MARIPLYN VOS SAVANT

What Else Can I do?

Count Your Blessings

Start a gratitude journal. Make a list of things you are grateful for at least three times weekly. Robert Emmons, PhD, psychology professor and author of *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* encourages people to focus on "simple everyday pleasures, people in your life, personal strengths or talents, moments of natural beauty or gestures of kindness from others." Based on his research, Emmons has made some striking discoveries, most notable that people who keep gratitude journals are 25% happier than those who do not. If you look at the bright side of things and see all that is wonderful in your life, you won't be so tempted to concentrate on failure, disappointments, and unmet expectations.

Source: "Living Thanksgiving: Science Shows Gratitude Can Have Wide-Ranging Health Benefits," by E. Schneider, Energy Times, November/December, 2008.

In this mode, as Jenny stands in line, she notices the speed at which it is moving and accepts that this is how concert ticket lines sometimes move. In doing this, Jenny retains her equanimity and her ability to think rationally. When we respond to events and circumstances with acceptance, we experience the positive emotion of peacefulness naturally.

Consider the metaphor of a cork drifting down a stream. It is moving along easily as the current takes it gently down to some endpoint. On its way, it approaches a huge rock stationed in the middle of the river. What the cork *does not* do when it encounters this rock is to begin yelling at the rock for getting in the cork's way, thinking it should not be there (resistance). It also does not whine and moan because of its beliefs that rocks should not impede this cork's path (attachment/rightness). The cork also does not call the rock angry names for getting in its path (judgment). The cork simply follows the current that flows around the big rock and continues on its way (acceptance/allowance).

Gratitude Gratitude means, after witnessing an event, showing appreciation or thankfulness for the opportunity to experience this moment. In this frame of mind, we see each moment as a gift with something in it that will help us grow, develop, and enjoy life even more. The results of having an attitude of gratitude? Contentment, peace, and joy. These feelings are diametrically opposed to those below the line of stress—tension and anxiety. When we are thankful for what is happening, we need not bother about what is *not* happening. We appreciate, and that is sufficient for us in that moment.

Jenny might respond with appreciation by saying, "I'm sure glad I'm healthy enough to remain standing here as long as I am" or "I'm usually in such a hurry. This is an ideal time to slow down and enjoy not doing anything for a little while. What a great feeling!" If Jenny were to respond to the slow-moving ticket line in this way, how calm and serene she would feel! Gratitude, thankfulness, and appreciation are enormously powerful responses in creating and maintaining inner feelings of well-being and serenity.

When we respond above the line, we remain in greater control of our inner environment and, as a result, we prevent stress from happening. We are in charge of our inner life regardless of what is happening outside of us.

If we find ourselves in a situation that does require change or action, and we *can* do something to improve it, we should do what is necessary to make the appropriate change. For example, if a person walks past an alley and sees someone getting robbed, the response of taking action to change what is happening (calling 911, for example) is far more appropriate than going with the flow and accepting what is happening. This focus on how to respond does not imply an attitude that allows people or situations to get the best of us. Sometimes getting serious and taking positive action or being attached to a right way to do something can be the most valuable way of responding to a situation or event.

Author Anecdote

Responding to Garbage

One day I was riding my road bike on a highway. After a pleasant ride of about 25 miles, I looked back to see a truck approaching very close to where I was riding on the road. As it got even closer, I sensed that it was slowing slightly. As the truck came beside me, I felt something hit my shoulder. The young boys in the truck had hurled their bag of fast-food garbage at me. I was surprised by the action, but the bag didn't hurt me at all. As I continued riding, I watched the boys in the truck laughing and speeding ahead as fast as their old truck could go.

Now was my chance to respond. At this point, I could do absolutely nothing to affect these kids. Even on my best days, I couldn't possibly catch their speedy truck. I was left to myself to respond in whatever way I chose. Let's consider each of the following ways of responding to see how my thinking would affect my emotional state.

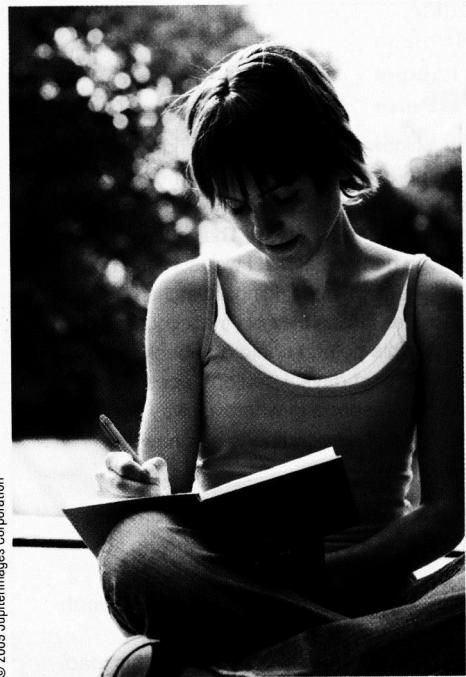
- **Attachment:** Young kids like those shouldn't be allowed to drive on this stretch of road. There should be a law against kids driving so close to bikers. (*anger, mistrust, stress*)
- **Judgment.** Those idiot, good-for-nothing kids are so rotten and worthless! (*false pride, stress*)
- **Resistance/Complaining.** I wish those kids weren't riding on this road. It's too narrow anyway. Why did they choose to ride here today and throw their garbage at me? (*frustration, anger, resentment, stress*)
- **Observance.** Hmm . . . I noticed those boys threw something out of the truck, and it happened to hit me. I noticed they kept right on going without bothering to pick it up. (*calmness*)
- **Discovery.** I wonder where those boys ate lunch today. Based on the bag, it looks like a burger and fries. If I would have hit my brakes really hard just as I saw the bag coming, I wonder by how far the bag would have missed me. (*curiosity, growth*)
- **Acceptance.** Those kids were just trying to have some fun. And I'm not hurt. I can fully accept them for being how they are. They're just doing what kids do. I probably did something like that when I was younger. Soon enough, they will learn from their actions what brings joy and what brings pain. I'm fine with that. (*peace, freedom, relaxation*)
- **Gratitude.** I'm so grateful that I didn't get hurt and that I have the good health to be out on my bike riding on this beautiful day. I'm riding a great bike, and I get to enjoy riding on such nice roads. Sure, odd things happen, but I appreciate being able to have odd things happen to me in the first place so I can learn to be more in control of my thinking. (*joy, happiness, freedom*)

In place of this situation, we could substitute any other event and we will get the same opportunity to choose—and the same resulting emotional states.

—MO

When it rains, I let it.

—113-YEAR-OLD MAN IN
RESPONSE TO A QUESTION
ABOUT THE SECRET OF
HIS LONGEVITY



© 2009 Jupiterimages Corporation

Keeping a gratitude journal can help you feel happier.

In the discussion here, we are dealing with situations over which we have no control. If you are sitting in a traffic jam, for example, you will want to choose effective ways of responding to remain calm and enjoy the experience more fully.

The way we respond to the events in life results in either an empowering proactive attitude or a disempowering, reactive attitude. Effectively incorporating these ideas into your daily activities takes practice. We typically are not conditioned to respond at the more effective levels. If we respond ineffectively, we create a chaotic inner environment that will activate the stress response. If we respond effectively, we will maintain inner peace. Realizing this, we understand that our inner experience is completely within our control.

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy

Albert Ellis developed **rational emotive behavior therapy** (REBT) based on the premise that stress-related behaviors are initiated by self-defeating perceptions that can be changed. Viewing situations and events consciously gives a clearer look at events to see them in more effective and productive ways. REBT emphasizes replacing defeating, victimizing thoughts and feelings with more accurate and powerful thoughts. The result of this approach to how we think is a more peaceful and happy life. Individuals take responsibility for their emotions, resulting in the power to change and overcome unhealthy behaviors that interfere with the ability to function and enjoy life.

REBT is based on the following simple, but profound, principles:

1. You are responsible for your own emotions and actions.
2. Your harmful emotions and dysfunctional behaviors are the product of your own irrational thinking.
3. You can learn more realistic views and, with practice, make them a part of you.
4. You will experience a deeper acceptance of yourself and greater satisfactions in life by developing a reality-based perspective.

According to REBT, difficulties are of two different types: **practical problems** and **emotional problems**. Practical problems relate to things that result in feelings of being treated unfairly by others or being in undesirable situations. These usually are experiences over which you have little, if any, control. Unfortunately, our human tendency is to get emotionally disturbed about these practical problems.

For example, you might be on an underground subway train that has stopped and the lights have dimmed considerably. You find yourself getting angry, frightened, annoyed, or overwhelmed at the situation in which you find yourself. This emotional disturbance unnecessarily creates a second order of problems—emotional suffering. According to REBT, these are disturbances over which you have total control.

REBT Guidelines You begin taking control, and thereby minimizing emotional suffering, by following these guidelines:

1. *Take responsibility for your emotional upsets and distress.* Only you can upset yourself about events. The events themselves, no matter how undesirable, can never upset you. They do not have this power. Recognize that neither another person nor an adverse circumstance can ever disturb you. Only you can. Others can cause you physical pain—by hitting you over the head with a tennis racquet, for example—but you create your own emotional suffering, or self-defeating behavioral patterns, about what others do or say.
2. *Identify your “musts.”* Once you admit that you alone alter your own emotions and actions, determine precisely how to alter them. You begin by noticing some common “musts” that you might frequently say to yourself:
 - Must #1 is a *demand on you*: “I must do well and get approval or else I’m worthless.” This demand causes anxiety, depression, and lack of assertiveness.
 - Must #2 is a *demand on others*: “You must treat me reasonably, considerately, and lovingly or else you’re no good.” This demand leads to resentment, anger, hostility, and violence.
 - Must #3 is a *demand on situations*: “Life must be fair, easy, and hassle-free or else it is awful.” This thinking is associated with hopelessness, procrastination, and addictions.

Determine what you are demanding of yourself, of other people in your life, or of your life's circumstances. Once you have figured out the "must" behind your emotion, you are able to move forward and effectively reduce your distress.

3. *Determine the reality of your "musts."* The only way you will remain disturbed about difficulties is by persistently agreeing with one of these three "musts." Once you have come to a conclusion about what "must" you are demanding, you can confront and question your demands. Begin by asking yourself: "What is the evidence for my *must*?" "How is it true?" "Where is it etched in stone?" And then by seeing: "There is no evidence." "My *must* is entirely false." "It is not carved indelibly anywhere." Make your view *must-free*, and your emotions will heal.
4. *Upgrade your "musts" to preferences.* Now you proceed with your thoughts based on preferences:
 - Preference #1: "I strongly *prefer* to do well and get approval, but if I fail, I will accept myself fully."
 - Preference #2: "I strongly *prefer* that you treat me reasonably, kindly, and lovingly, but because I do not run the universe and it is a part of your human nature to err, I cannot control you."
 - Preference #3: "I strongly *prefer* that life be fair, easy, and hassle-free, and it's frustrating that it isn't, but I can bear frustration and still enjoy life considerably."

Rational emotive behavior therapy provides for conscious, controlled thinking. This cognitive restructuring can give you the tools you need to dispute negative thoughts at the moment they occur.

ABCDE Technique The **ABCDE technique** is a simple way of remembering the REBT mental process. Dr. Ellis devised this method of coping with anxiety, which consists of examining irrational beliefs.⁵ The technique involves first examining irrational beliefs that make us anxious, then changing those beliefs and envisioning more positive consequences of our actions. The ABCDE technique consists of the following steps:

- A = Activating event (identify the stressor)
- B = Belief system (identify rational and irrational beliefs)
- C = Consequences (mental, physical, behavioral)
- D = Dispute irrational beliefs
- E = Effect (change consequences)

When an activating event (A) occurs, it can cause a reaction or consequence (C) in a person. After careful examination, however, we may find that A did not actually cause C. What really caused C to happen was the person's belief system (B). Following are a couple of examples to demonstrate how this works.

A person performs poorly on a test. That event is A, what actually happened. This fact might activate the belief system that sounds something like, "I really did poorly on that test. That is just horrible! *I always* do that. I'm really incompetent at everything I do. I'll never succeed. I'm worthless." The emotional result of thinking this way might include anxiety, loss of self-esteem, and even depression. We sometimes call this type of negative, irrational thinking *awfulizing* (which you learned about earlier in the chapter). This person is overreacting to the facts of the situation.

Consider another example in which a normal college student asks a girl out for a date and she turns him down (A). Irrational thinking based on a faulty belief system might sound like this: "I must not be good enough for her. Girls always turn me down. I'm such a loser." The emotional feelings (C) this person will experience may include anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. This way of thinking might even lead to a vicious circle of additional events that reinforce this student's negative belief system about his inability to have a comfortable situation with the opposite sex. As a result, he may avoid asking another person out on a date or avoid social situations altogether.

This irrational way of thinking, however, can be fixed by learning to successfully dispute (D) the irrational thought. In rational thinking, the student who did poorly on the test could change her way of thinking to a more accurate series of thoughts, which sound something like this: "Boy, that test was rough! Everybody struggles occasionally on tests. The important thing is that I learn from today's experience. How can I improve my performance on the next

test?" With these thoughts running through her head, she will feel powerful, assertive, and ready to continue pursuing her academic activities.

The young man who is turned down for the date might more accurately say these things to himself: "She must have a lot going on in her life. There are a lot of other girls who would be happy to spend some time with me. Everyone gets turned down occasionally. It's no big deal." He will be confident enough to find another person to go on a date with and will feel much better about himself. He will feel more courageous, confident, and self-assured with these thoughts foremost in his mind.

Once we dispute (D) the irrational belief, we are free to enjoy the positive psychological effects (E) of the more rational belief. By reinforcing realistic, self-benefiting beliefs, you can eliminate your emotional and behavioral problems in the present and avoid future problems of that sort. In the process, you'll experience far less stress.

The basic difference between an ordinary man and a warrior is that a warrior takes everything as a challenge, while an ordinary man takes everything as a blessing or a curse.

—CARLOS CASTANEDA

Conclusion

How we think matters! When we find ourselves under stress, our first reaction is often to look outside ourselves for something or someone to blame. However, as you have learned in this chapter, stress is not created by external events; it is created within us by our own thoughts. Thoughts give you the power to control experiences. Once you understand this idea, you can move on to transcend your sense of victimization and reach a place of control and empowerment.

Managing our self-talk, stopping negative thoughts, and going with the flow are powerful mental tools to help us prevent the stress response from activating. These tools help you tap into the power you already have to be a more centered, confident person. Awareness of our levels of responding, rational emotive behavior therapy, and other cognitive techniques introduced in this chapter can help you take control of your thoughts and help you experience inner peace.

LAB

6.1 A Day Above the Line

ACTIVITY Spend an entire day focusing on the principle of present moment acceptance and responding to every situation in ways that are above the line. Refer to the Levels of Responding Chart in this chapter. Do this activity on a busy day when you will have many opportunities to select your responses.

Amidst all your other activities of the day, keep in mind a constant awareness of the more effective ways of responding to people, situations, and experiences (noticing, discovering, accepting/allowing, and appreciating). Work to avoid responding to situations ineffectively (judging, criticizing, being right, complaining, and resisting). Use some type of cue to remind yourself throughout the day to respond effectively. This may be a rubber band on your wrist, a particular shirt, or some other unique reminder. As you start your day, this cue also helps you prepare to purposefully start the activity.

At the end of the day, write about your experience. Include:

1. The cue you used to remind yourself to live above the line.
2. Each opportunity you had to choose between effective and ineffective responding.
3. Several examples of above-the-line choices that you deliberately made. Be specific in describing several events that occurred throughout the day where your habit may be to respond ineffectively, yet you chose to apply what you learned to respond above the line. In bold, name the level describing your response (gratitude, allowance, etc.) to make it clear you understand and deliberately applied levels above the line.
4. What you noticed about your sense of inner peace, harmony, and happiness.
5. Any additional challenges and insights that you had about yourself while you focused on responding more effectively.