

Guidance Guide

What's Your Reality?

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There is no denying that our thoughts are powerful. The way we think impacts how we feel. If I am walking around all day saying, "I am worthless", "I can't seem to get it together" and an endless list of "have to's," I can guarantee you are not feeling peaceful, calm and confident. However, if you walk around thinking positive (and realistic) thoughts like, "I am worthy, I am doing the best I can and I don't have to do anything....what do I want? What are my choices?" I can guarantee you will feel calmer and more confident.

Dr. Arron Beck, a psychiatrist is known as one of the top influential psychotherapists of all time. He outlined different patterns of thinking that create stress. Most of us engage in some, if not all of them. As I often say to my students and clients, we can't make any changes until we are aware.

So step one is starting to track your thoughts. Beck's patterns are a helpful tool in allowing you to do this. It's not as easy as it appears. Many of us are so caught up in the busyness of life that we aren't even aware of our thought patterns. If someone is feeling sad, depressed, stressed or anxious, there are thought patterns that are contributing to the mood. Once we are aware, we are then ready to move in to step two which is to reframe our negative/stressful thoughts. I like to say, "what's the reality?" or "where is the evidence" or is this a "true/factual statement?"

I am starting to meet with Grade 5 students and will be introducing the patterns to them. I am already having them track what is referred to as

"mindreading/making up stories (my personal favorite)." This is when we make up a story and then we believe it and have an emotional response. It is human nature to have an end to a story and if we don't have one we organically make it up. However, we get ourselves in to trouble when we start believing our story and having an emotional response. The story may be true. Or it might not be. The key is to collect the evidence.

Emotions are important. We are feeling beings, this is what makes us human. So this process is not about dismissing emotions. Rather it's about giving ourselves permission to feel based on reality. So for example, if a student fails a test, there can be true sadness and legitimate frustration. However if they frame it as, "I am so stupid, I will never make it through high school, the teacher hates me, etc.," then the thoughts have gotten out of control and it's making a difficult situation worse (and probably not based on reality.)

A fun homework assignment is to learn these patterns, practice awareness and train your partners, kids and friends. Then you can all hold one another accountable. My fifth grader is already an expert! And my five year old is well on her way.

Filtering: We take the negative details and magnify them while filtering out all positive aspects of a situation. For instance, a person may pick out a single, unpleasant detail and dwell on it exclusively so that their vision of reality becomes darkened or distorted.

Polarized Thinking (or “black and white” thinking):

In this type of thinking pattern, we believe that we have to be perfect or we’re a failure – there is no middle ground. You place people or situations in “either/or” categories, with no shades of gray or allowing for the complexity of most people and situations. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure.

Overgeneralization: In this thinking style, we come to a general conclusion based on a single incident or a single piece of evidence. If something bad happens only once, we expect it to happen over and over again. A person may see a single, unpleasant event as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat.

Jumping to Conclusions/Mindreading: Without individuals saying so, we know what they are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, we are able to determine how people are feeling toward us.

Catastrophizing/magnifying: We expect disaster to strike, no matter what. We hear about a problem and use “what if” questions (e.g., “what if tragedy strikes?” “what if it happens to me?”).

Personalization: In this type of thinking, a person believes that everything others do or say is some kind of direct, personal reaction to the person. We also compare ourselves to others trying to determine who is smarter, better looking, etc.

Control Fallacies: If we feel externally controlled, we see ourselves as helpless a victim of fate. For example, “I can’t help it if the quality of the work is poor, my teacher rushed me”. The fallacy of internal control has us assuming responsibility for the pain and happiness of everyone around us. For example, “why aren’t you happy? Is it because of something I did?”

Fallacy of Fairness: We feel resentful because we think we know what is fair, but other people don’t agree with us. As our parents tell us we’re growing up and something doesn’t go our way, “life isn’t always fair.” People who go through life applying a measuring ruler against every situation judging its “fairness” will often feel badly and negative because

of it. Because life isn’t “fair” – things will not always work out in your favor, even when you think they should.

Blaming: We hold other people responsible for our pain, or take the other track and blame ourselves for every problem. For example, “stop making me feel bad about myself!” Nobody can “make” us feel any particular way – only we have control over our own emotions and emotional reactions.

Shoulds: We have a list of ironclad rules about how others and we should behave. People who break the rules make us angry, and we feel guilty when we violate these rules. A person may often believe they are trying to motivate themselves with should and shouldn’ts, as if they have to be punished before they can do anything. For example, I really should exercise. I shouldn’t be so lazy. Musts and oughts are also offenders. The emotional consequence is guilt. When a person directs should statements toward others, they often feel anger, frustration and resentment.

Emotional Reasoning: We believe that what we feel must be true automatically. If we feel stupid and boring, then we must be stupid and boring. You assume that your unhealthy emotions reflect the way things really are – “I feel it, therefore it must be true.”

Fallacy of Change: We expect that other people will change to suit us if we just pressure or cajole them enough. We need to change people because our hopes for happiness seem to depend entirely on them.

Global Labeling: We generalize one or two qualities into a negative global judgment. These are extreme forms of generalizing. Instead of describing an error in context of a specific situation, a person will attach an unhealthy label to themselves. For example, they may say, “I’m a loser” in a situation where they failed at a specific task. When someone else’s behavior rubs a person the wrong way, they may attach an unhealthy label to him, such as “he’s a real dummy.” Mislabeling involves describing an event

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with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded. For example, instead of saying “that classmate misses a lot of school, a person who is mislabeling might say that “that student doesn’t care about school at all, he/she is lazy.”

Always Being Right: We are continually on trial to prove that our opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable and we will go to any length to demonstrate our rightness. For example, “I don’t care how badly arguing with me makes you feel, I’m going to win this argument no matter what because I’m right.” Being right often is more important than the feelings of others around a person who engages in this cognitive distortion, even loved ones.

Heaven’s Reward Fallacy: We expect our sacrifice and self-denial to pay off, as if someone is keeping score. We feel bitter when the reward doesn’t come.

How to combat thoughts the cause stress?

Ask yourself.....

- Am I making up a story?
- What’s the reality? Show me the proof.
- What are the facts? Show me the evidence.
- Is this any of my business?
- How important is it?
- Are these thoughts helpful to me

*Referenced by Dr. Beck through the Cognitive Therapy Website

Erie Day School Motto

May I live each day being mindful of the goodness that surrounds me.

May I always stretch my mind and heart so that I live my life in wisdom and love.

May I be a loyal friend to others and willingly help those in need, and may I always honor and respect the earth of which I am a part.



Erie Day School

Learning today, leading tomorrow.

Erie Day School
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If you have any questions, comments or additions to the *Guidance Guide*, or know someone that should be included on the email distribution list, please contact Allison Parr-Plasha at 814-452-4273 or via email at aplasha@eriedayschool.com

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