

Effects of Perception on Stress

'Fill in the blanks' exercise. What thoughts could result in the non-stressful outcomes?

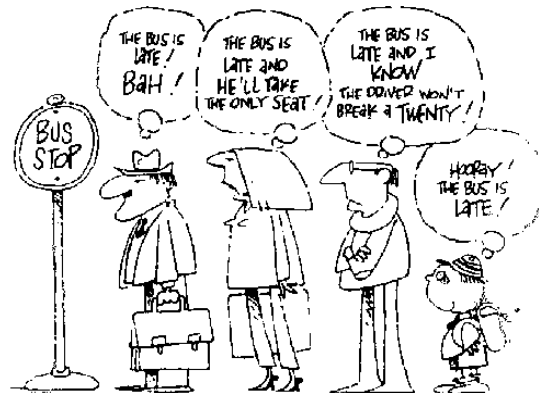
Potential Stress	Stress-inducing perception	Non-stressful Perception
Morning ...Sleeps in. Awake at 8 a.m. instead of 7 a.m.	<p>THOUGHTS: How could I? I can't be late again! The boss will be furious! I know this will be a terrible day,</p> <p>ACTION: Gulps coffee, skips breakfast, yells at wife, breaks shoelace getting dressed in a rush.</p> <p>RESULT: Leaves home anxious, worried & hungry.</p>	<p>THOUGHTS:</p> <p>ACTION: Phones office. Has a late breakfast.</p> <p>RESULT: Leaves home calm and relaxed.</p>
Caught behind slow drier	<p>THOUGHTS: What a hopeless inconsiderate driver - an idiot.</p> <p>ACTION: Flashes lights, honks, curses,bangs on dash. Finally passes, dangerously.</p>	<p>THOUGHTS:</p> <p>ACTION: Brief relaxation e.g. isometrics, deep muscle relaxation.</p>
Manager complains about quality of work and asks for improvement in performance from department	<p>THOUGHTS: That self-righteous creep! He should look at his own performance! He has no right to expect more from me.</p> <p>FEELINGS: Anger, blame.</p> <p>ACTION: Angrily yell at boss, subordinates, wife, kids, get drunk, plan revenge.</p>	<p>THOUGHTS:</p> <p>FEELINGS: Concern, disappointment.</p> <p>ACTION: Calmly talk to get details, talk to subordinates, plan ways to change.</p>
Mid-day ... errors and behind on deadlines and large pile-up of paperwork.	<p>THOUGHTS: That's the last straw. I'll have to have this whole report re-done. I'll have to stay and work late.</p> <p>ACTION: Skips lunch. Has a coffee at desk. Spills coffee over important papers.</p>	<p>THOUGHTS:</p> <p>ACTION: Eats a light lunch and has short walk in the park.</p>
Evening ... about to go to bed.	<p>THOUGHTS: What a life! It should be better than this. It's not worth it. I'll never amount to anything!</p> <p>STRESS LEVEL: High</p>	<p>THOUGHTS:</p> <p>STRESS LEVEL: Low</p>

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Exercise from previous page. Suggested thoughts resulting in non-stressful outcomes.

Potential Stress	Stress-inducing perception	Non-stressful Perception
Morning ...Sleeps in. Awake at 8 a.m. instead of 7 a.m.	THOUGHTS: How could I? I can't be late again! The boss will be furious! I know this will be a terrible day, ACTION: Gulps coffee, skips breakfast, yells at wife, breaks shoelace getting dressed in a rush. RESULT: Leaves home anxious, worried & hungry.	THOUGHTS: I must have needed the extra sleep. I'd better let the office know I'll be late. ACTION: Phones office. Has a late breakfast. RESULT: Leaves home calm and relaxed.
Caught behind slow drier	THOUGHTS: What a hopeless inconsiderate driver - an idiot. ACTION: Flashes lights, honks, curses,bangs on dash. Finally passes, dangerously.	THOUGHTS: This is a good opportunity to practice relaxation. ACTION: Brief relaxation e.g. isometrics, deep muscle relaxation.
Manager complains about quality of work and asks for improvement in performance from department	THOUGHTS: That self-righteous creep! He should look at his own performance! He has no right to expect more from me. FEELINGS: Anger, blame. ACTION: Angrily yell at boss, subordinates, wife, kids, get drunk, plan revenge.	THOUGHTS: It certainly is disappointing to get complaints like this one. I'd better get the details to see what I can do. FEELINGS: Concern, disappointment. ACTION: Calmly talk to get details, talk to subordinates, plan ways to change.
Mid-day ... errors and behind on deadlines and large pile-up of paperwork.	THOUGHTS: That's the last straw. I'll have to have this whole report re-done. I'll have to stay and work late. ACTION: Skips lunch. Has a coffee at desk. Spills coffee over important papers.	THOUGHTS: I'll be in better shape for this if I take a break. I'll have a walk and some time out of the office. ACTION: Eats a light lunch and has short walk in the park.
Evening ... about to go to bed.	THOUGHTS: What a life! It should be better than this. It's not worth it. I'll never amount to anything! STRESS LEVEL: High	THOUGHTS: A reasonable day. Glad I was able to sort out the problem with the boss. Felt really effective this afternoon. STRESS LEVEL: Low

A Chain Reaction Model of Stress



Self-talk (what we tell ourselves about an event) is an important link in the chain of the stress response. This model shows how belief becomes biology.

Event (being fired, driver cutting in front of you, criticism, losing something.)



Certain **perceptions or self-talk** - "This is a very dangerous situation" or "I might look silly if I make a mistake" or "Things should be how I would like them to be and it is awful, horrible when they are not."



Emotional reactions (e.g. anxiety, worry, alarm, anger.)



Physical changes (e.g. respiratory, hormonal, muscular, cardiovascular changes.)



Behavioural reactions (impatience, irritability, avoiding responsibilities, getting loud and aggressive, becoming shy and withdrawn.)



Stress-related Disorder if emotional and physical reactions are very intense, long-term without much relief. (e.g. panic attacks, chronic headaches, cardiovascular problems, digestive problems, insomnia, reactive depression, "burn-out" etc.)

Often, though not always, we can do little to change or prevent stressful events. What we do have control over though is *how we define those events* - what we **specifically** tell ourselves about them.

Over time these specific thoughts may grow into certain **thinking styles**. These are habitual ways of interpreting events, such as overgeneralising. "Well I messed that up. I shouldn't make mistakes like that. It just proves what a total failure I am!"

Each reindoctrination with faulty thinking slowly builds our **core beliefs** that define ourselves e.g. "I am a failure."

To re-build them with more realistic beliefs we need to challenge and dispute our faulty reasoning.

Compare the following:

"I am a failure because I have made many big mistakes in my life."

versus

"I'm a human being, therefore fallible. I make mistakes in my life - some of them big ones! But that just makes me like everyone else."

Where's the evidence for the first conclusion? The second – an example of good, realistic thinking - is more in tune with the reality of human life.

Cognitive Restructuring

Changing Your Mental Attitude Towards Stressors



Cognitive restructuring is a two part process by which we:

1. become **aware** of our unrealistic thinking patterns which lead to feelings of stress and self-defeating behaviour and
2. **change** these thought processes to more productive ones.

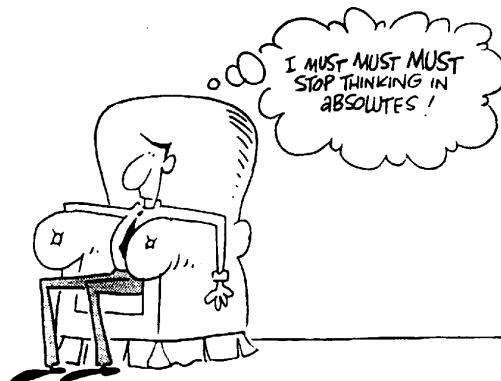
The assumption here is that it is not what I actually *experience* but *what I tell myself about that experience* just before, during or after it. This determines to a large degree how I will feel and act in relation to it. Put six people through the same stressful situation and you'll get six different reactions. They have their own unique interpretations that relate to their experiences and how they define the situation.

The aim of cognitive restructuring is first to recognise faulty self talk. Often it may have become so rapid over the years that we may not even notice it as complete sentences. All we may perceive is a distressing feeling or an image born of some half-conscious self-talk. When our thinking is unrealistic, our distress intensifies. High levels of distress can, in turn, narrow our perspectives. So an initial step is to check for the nature of the thinking that underlies our stressful responses. Ask: "Am I 'shoulding' or 'catastrophising' myself into distress?"

Second is to practise ways of coping with any self-defeating statements. The aim is to get a more realistic, less exaggerated view of ourselves, others and our situations. This usually means giving ourselves a challenge. "Where is it written in purple letters across the sky that I should ...?" "Will it really be terrible, awful or unbearably catastrophic if things don't turn out the way I want/demand?" "This is what I prefer... but hell if it doesn't happen, probably at worst it'll be unpleasant or a pain in the rear but 'unpleasant' I can stand!" Less extreme internal language means less extreme reactions.

Some **styles of thinking** that make us more vulnerable to distress include:

1. Making irrational, absolutist assumptions about the world and its events.
"Everybody must like and approve of me all the time." "I must never fail at anything!"
2. Drawing conclusions when evidence is lacking or even contradictory.
"I see a youth walking the street at night and assume he is up to no good!"
3. Exaggerating the meaning of an event.
" If I am late for work one more time I just know I will be fired."
4. Disregarding important aspects of a situation.
Not hearing that I have been praised by my colleague for the way I handled a situation or my creativity on our project; only recalling the bit about how I overspent on my budget.
5. Oversimplifying events as right/wrong or good/ bad instead of seeing the big picture or the subtleties in life - the shades of grey.
"They are either for me or against me."
6. Overgeneralising from a single event.
The new worker on the job neglects to say 'good morning' so I tell myself she is stuck-up.
7. Specific self-defeating self statements.
"I'm gonna screw this up." "I can't stand it!" when in fact your track record has been pretty good or that you have coped with far worse.



Some **techniques** to try instead:

1. Substitute reality for imagination. Argue with yourself. "I can handle this." "Just because he's frowning doesn't mean he is going to get angry." "I can't make everyone like me." Disputing beliefs on paper is more effective. See pages 32 - 34.
2. If disputing seems too lengthy and difficult under pressure, collect and recall some powerful stock phrases that you believe to be true. "Shit happens!" "Bad things happen to good people." "Sometimes the world is an unfair, cruel and nasty place." "Should ...should ... should. Shouldhood is shithood!" See pages 35-36.
3. Stop persistent disturbing thoughts by silently shouting "STOP!" to yourself and following it with more realistic or self-affirming thoughts. See the section on managing worry.
4. Relabel your feeling so that it can be used more creatively. From "I'm so anxious I can't think." to "This anxiety can be an ally: a cue to cope ... to use my stress management techniques."
5. Combine more rational thinking with calming physical strategies. When you become angry or anxious, remind yourself to reduce the volume and pace of your speech or to breathe slowly and steadily.

Common Mistakes in Thinking

Listed below are common *styles* of thinking - as opposed to specific thoughts listed on the following pages - that can get us into emotional trouble. Recognising the particular thinking traps that you are more likely to fall into can give you advance warning of when you are more likely to be distressed.

Overgeneralising

This involves drawing a general conclusion on the basis of only one incident. You are telling yourself that, if something was true in one case it will apply to any case that is remotely similar. In fact life is rarely that simple.

Black and white thinking

This means to see things as being only one extreme or the other such as telling yourself a friendship must be very good, otherwise it is very bad. In the real world there are many shades or grey.

'Who needs evidence?'

This mistake involves drawing a conclusion without any real evidence to support it, or in the face of contradictory evidence. For example, saying no one likes you when you could not possibly have asked everybody, or even do have some friends. Ask yourself, "What is the real world evidence to support my conclusions in this self-talk?".

Looking at the world through deep blue glasses

This means focusing on what is wrong and blowing it up out of all proportion - your mistakes, your failures, your problems - and ignoring or belittling anything that's right - your successes, good times and achievements. Looking at the world through rose-coloured glasses can be misleading too. Stop distorting the world in either direction.

Imagining the worst

This is a special case or exaggeration of looking through the world through deep blue glasses, but it is so common that it deserves a mention of its own:

imagining the worst means assuming the worst possible outcome for any event, usually so exaggerated that it's really improbable, if not impossible.

Taking things personally

This means blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong, even when you may only be partly or not at all responsible, like blaming only yourself for problems in your marriage (we'll bet your spouse contributes to them too). If you really run the whole universe, please tell us how. Taking things personally can also mean assuming that everybody notices every mistake you make, that you are the centre of everybody's (disapproving) attention. You will usually find most people are too busy worrying about their own problems even to notice you.

A note about depression and thinking styles

People who are more likely to remain depressed for significantly longer than others tend to engage in three particular thinking styles.

The more chronically depressed see serious adversity as “personal, permanent, pervasive” – the so-called cognitive triad or 3P's of depression. They are down on themselves, the future and the world. In other words, they believe it is somehow their fault that the bad thing happened; they believe that when life hits them with a major blow they believe that the effect is not temporary - that it will probably not pass; and they think every aspect of their life - their whole world - will be affected by this event.

On the other hand, people who recover relatively quickly from a depressing event see it as temporary, having a well-defined impact on *part* on their life not the whole, and they are wise enough to realise that significant forces beyond themselves generally operate more powerfully to influence human misfortune. In other words, they believe that are not to blame when things go badly wrong.

Remaining aware of these depression thinking traps can help you do a psychological side-step before you fall into them. This will allow you to minimise the time you remain depressed after, say, a major loss.

Stress and Your Thinking

Apart from drugs and alcohol the most powerful way of lowering your stress levels is to change your thinking from self talk that is negative, irrational or that emphasises not coping to self talk that is more rational, positive and which emphasises constructive coping. Thinking more rationally is an important stress management procedure. Humans do their most important relaxation in their minds. (The corollary is equally true, self talk is a prime cause of stress related problems.)

Ten Popular Irrational Beliefs

1. I must be loved, or at least liked, and approved by every significant person I meet.
2. I must be completely competent, make no mistakes, and achieve in every possible way, if I am to be worthwhile.
3. Some people are bad, wicked, or evil and they should be blamed and punished for this.
4. It is dreadful, nearly the end of the world, when things are not how I would like them to be.
5. Human unhappiness, including mine, is caused by factors outside of my control, so little can be done about it.
6. If something might be dangerous, difficult, unpleasant or frightening I should worry about it a great deal.
7. It is easier to put off something difficult or unpleasant than it is to face up to it.
8. I need someone stronger than myself to depend on.
9. My problems were caused by events in my past and that is why I have my problems now.
10. I should be very upset by other people's problems and difficulties.

Common themes: Exaggeration of reasonable ideas.

Exaggeration of importance of things and consequences of events.

Setting too high goals and standards.

Ten Rational Ideas

(Numbers correspond with previous page.)

1. I want to be loved or liked and approved by some of the people in my life and I know I may feel disappointed or lonely when that does not happen, but I can cope with those feelings, and I can take constructive steps to make and keep better relationships.
2. I want to do some thing well most of the time, but like everyone else, I will occasionally fail or make a mlstake. Then I may feel bad, but I can handle that, and I can take constructive steps to do better next time.
3. It is sad that most of us do some bad things from time to time, and some people do a lot of bad things, but making myself upset won't change that.
4. It is disappointing, sometimes very disappointing when things are not how I would like them to be, but I can cope with that. Usually I can take constructive steps to make things more how I would like them to be, but if I can't it does not help to exaggerate my disappointment.
5. My problem(s) may be influenced by factors outside of me or my control, but my thoughts and actions also influence my problem(s), and they are under my control.
6. Worrying about something that might go wrong won't stop it from happening it just makes me unhappy now. I can take constructive steps to prepare for possible problems, and that's as much as anyone can do. So I won't dwell on the future now.
7. Facing difficult situations or problems may make me feel bad at the time, but I can cope with that. Putting off problems does not make them any easier - it just gives me longer to worry about them.
8. It's good to get support and assistance from others when I want it, but the only person I need to rely on is me.
9. My problem(s) may have started in some past event(s) but what keeps them going now are my thoughts and actions, and they are under my control.
10. It is sad to see other people in trouble, but I don't help them by making myself miserable; sometimes I can take constructive steps to help them.

Commonalities: Accept reasonable bad feelings.

Set reasonable goals and standards.

Try to look at the world more realistically.

Doing something constructive (changing stressors.)

You can practically apply these more rational thoughts by writing them out on a card and rehearsing them must before you go into a situation that you expect to feel bad in. Reading the card several times a day is another useful practice technique. After a while you will not need so much practice and your thinking will be more rational automatically.