

How Our Response Systems Impact Us Changing Our Perceptions to Change Our Reality

“People aren’t disturbed by events, but by the view they hold about them.” ~ Epictetus, philosopher

What causes your feelings and reactions in any given situation?

Most of the time, *you do!* Your thoughts are just thoughts, not feelings; but you can certainly convert them into feelings and drive yourself crazy.

When you start to attach to your thoughts, they transform into unquestioned attitudes and habits, which impact the beliefs you hold about yourself, others, and the world in general. Those beliefs then determine how you react in any given situation – i.e. your feelings and your behavior – since they trigger your perception of the event. This is why different people react differently in different situations due to their own belief systems/perceptions; yet we tend to interpret others’ behavior based on how *we* react, which in turn is based in our unique ABC patterns (see below), that vary for every single individual, in every single situation. The only constant: when one experiences suffering, it’s generally because they’re fighting with reality – i.e. what *is*, *why* it happened, how it *should* turn out, how others *should* behave, and their own ability to accept and handle the situation.

In general, irrational thoughts lead to unhappiness and other negative emotions. So if you change your thoughts, you can change your emotions. This is why, cognitive therapy – a very successful form of therapy that works with our ABC patterns – involves teaching people to challenge their thinking and rid themselves of their “*automatic thoughts*” which lead to “*dysfunctional attitudes*”. It involves recognizing when you’re mentally engaging in catastrophizing (assuming the worst in a bad situation), or overgeneralizing (believing that if one bad thing happened, many more will also, or that experiencing failure makes *you* a failure/loser), so you can change your thought process.

So what’s an ABC pattern?

A is the activating trigger, **B** is the belief one holds about it, and **C** is the consequence one experiences (feelings/behaviors/symptoms) based in their assumptions. And each time one repeats that pattern, both their assumptions as well as their results become more and more ingrained – whether they’re right or wrong – creating a vicious cycle. To change one’s behavior, they need to change their belief system. To change one’s belief system, they need to examine/question their beliefs, to see whether they’re healthy or unhealthy, and visualize how changing the unhealthy beliefs could change their experience of life.

Healthy vs. Unhealthy Mind-Sets

Healthy mind-sets make sense, are flexible, logical and consistent with reality, and allow one to avoid mental chaos and suffering.

Unhealthy mind-sets tend to be inflexible, rigid and dogmatic. They are based on “must”, “have to”, “need to”, “should”, “can’t”, etc., and don’t allow one to accept other possibilities, making them react badly when things don’t turn out as expected.

Here are some examples which demonstrate the difference:

1. **Concern vs. Anxiety:** Concern is healthy because it keeps everything in perspective, and your thoughts are constructive and solution-based. Anxiety is unhealthy because it makes you exaggerate the threat and thereby become stuck.
2. **Sadness vs. Depression:** Sadness allows you to think of both the positives as well as the negatives, evaluate each of them, learn from your mistakes and then move on. Depression makes you only focus on the negatives and keeps you stuck in the past, which makes you feel like a failure.
3. **Annoyance vs. Anger:** No matter how annoyed you are, you are still able to hear the other person out, not attribute malice, or take things personally. But when you are angry, you assume the other person’s intentions were malicious, you can’t see their point of view, and you personalize everything.
4. **Sorrow vs. Hurt:** Sorrow allows you to think in a balanced way about any unfairness, without assuming that the other person doesn’t care about you – as such, you don’t wait for them to make amends. Hurt makes you exaggerate the unfairness, assume the other person doesn’t care about you, and makes you wait for the other person to make amends.
5. **Remorse vs. Guilt:** Remorse makes you think about what you did, put it in context, acknowledge the situation and the circumstances, and then set things right in a healthy way. Guilt makes you feel you’ve committed a sin and as such you deserve punishment; so you escape from the feeling in destructive ways, and make unrealistic promises that you can’t keep.
6. **Regret vs. Shame:** With regret, you can still remain compassionate towards yourself, accept yourself, be realistic about the likelihood of negative judgment, and accept others’ intervention. With shame, you exaggerate the likelihood of negative judgment and end up being defensive, avoiding others and/or attacking those who you *think* shamed you.

We have thousands of thoughts in a given day, creating an internal dialogue which can either work to our advantage or disadvantage, depending upon whether our thoughts are healthy or unhealthy, and whether or not they embrace reality. Fixating on “if only he/she could do such and such differently, I would feel so much better” or “this is how things should happen” does nothing beyond keeping you trapped in miserable feelings, because you’re fighting what is – i.e. reality – which is always a losing battle, since you can’t change reality; and that incongruence is what causes your suffering.

If you follow every painful thought to its source, you'll realize that it was caused by you wanting reality to be different, thereby fighting it. But that's so futile. The only thing you can change is your beliefs, which influence your perception, thereby your feelings and the resulting behavior – which needs to change if you want to change the outcome. As Albert Einstein put it, “The definition of stupidity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

But for change to stick, you have to start with changed attitudes. And the best way to do that is: for each attitude you hold, assess whether your belief around it is healthy or unhealthy, think about the expected results – what would happen if I hold on to my current thought, or let it go – and then change your attitude if need be, to give you the results you're hoping for, while focusing on “what's in it for me?”.

Byron Katie, author of “Loving What Is” refers to the process as doing “The Work”.

The Work

The Work is a simple, straightforward antidote to the unnecessary suffering we create for ourselves. It's not about escaping reality; in fact, it's about embracing it, so you don't torture yourself with resistance.

So how exactly do you do that? By asking yourself the following four questions and answering them with all sincerity and utmost honesty!

1. **Is what I'm thinking / what I believe true?**
2. **Do I know it to be *absolutely* true** – i.e. is it an indisputable fact, or just my impression? The only thing that's true is what's actually happening, not your interpretation of it, or what you think should be happening.
3. **How do I react when I think/believe that thought?**
4. **Who would I be without that thought** – i.e. how would my feelings and life change?

Once you complete that analysis, you'll be able to see the benefit in dropping those negative thoughts, and no stress-free reason for holding onto them. This is especially important when it comes to your “*automatic hot thoughts*” which spring up at times of intense stress or emotion, generally in response to fighting reality – they're called automatic because you don't even think about them, you just accept them, even though they're based in assumptions versus facts. They are especially strong when your demands aren't being met – and they cause unhealthy negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger or rage, along with reducing your frustration tolerance, which leads you to damn yourself or others.

Knowing what you know, if you can think about what those *automatic hot thoughts* might be – I feel angry when ..., I feel let down when ..., I feel like a failure when ..., etc.

– you can rehearse healthy versions ahead of time, with enough passion and conviction to illicit a response which engages you. That way, the second you feel those hot buttons being pushed, you can switch your internal dialogue to healthy self-talk and change your perception – and everything which results from it – before you cause yourself to suffer. With time, that way of thinking can become as automatic as your previous negative way.

The whole process is about changing what you can within *yourself* – with “self” being the most important part of the equation, since you can’t change others, nor should you try. Byron Katie says that there are three kinds of business – yours, others’, and God’s (which she equates to reality that’s out of our control). When we live our life in any business other than our own, we end up with discomfort, because there’s nothing we can do about it. But when we focus on our own life and making it congruent with accepting reality versus fighting it, we can stop our suffering!

So how do you make the change?

1. Start *thinking* in constructive ways and challenge your unhealthy negative thoughts – i.e. do “The Work”.
2. Start *behaving* in constructive ways and stop behaving in unhealthy ways.
3. Repeat the above over and over again, tolerating the negative emotions that may result due to unfamiliarity, until the new way starts to feel comfortable. It’s just like when you learned how to drive or dance – the discomfort and fear of the unfamiliar was eventually replaced by something that felt effortless. The idea is to keep your eyes on the goal. A 100 meter hurdle runner keeps their eyes on the finish line – if they were to focus on the hurdles instead, they’d crash into them and fail.
4. Watch your feelings change, which will lead to changed behaviors that stick.

Beyond that, in dealing with other individuals, you need to respect their own unhealthy attitudes as well as their personalities – the latter ties into what’s important to them, what makes them tick, and so on, which may be different from what’s important to you and what makes you tick. The best way to gauge that part is by understanding each of your emotional command systems.

Emotional Command Systems

According to research conducted by neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp at Bowling Green State University, there are seven distinct "*emotional command systems*" believed to be present in each person's brain. Each one of these coordinates the emotional, behavioral, and physical responses needed for certain functions related to survival (food, shelter, safety, rest, procreation, etc.). According to this theory, people differ in how much they like to have these systems stimulated. Identifying your own optimal level of stimulation is important for your emotional well-being. It'll allow you to:

1. Build an awareness of your own emotional needs – i.e. learn why are you attracted to certain people, activities or subject matters?
2. Improve your ability to make bids and respond to other people's bids for connection – i.e. know what you need and understand why you need it?
3. Better understand the people you're close to – i.e. consider how others in your life are affected by their own emotional command systems, and how these effects may color your relationships with them.

Acknowledging emotional similarities and differences in your relationships is an important part of forming solid emotional connections.

What are the seven types of Emotional Command Systems?

1. **Explorer (Exploration, Discovery)**
 - Seeking: learning, questioning, goal-setting.
 - Feeling: curiosity, excitement, interest, mastery.
 - Over-activation creates intense sensation seeking, overwork, manic behavior. Under-activation leads to restlessness, boredom, irritation, anxiety.
2. **Commander-in-Chief (Dominance, Control)**
 - Seeking: power, freedom, forcing action.
 - Feeling: confidence, power.
 - Over-activation creates anger, aggression, rage, violent attack. Under- activation leads to impotence, passivity, frustration.
3. **Sensualist (Sexual Gratification, Procreation)**
 - Seeking: sex, flirtation, arousal, sexual contact, intercourse.
 - Feeling: excitement, pleasure.
 - Over-activation creates sexual risk-taking, coercion, sexual harassment. Under-activation leads to aversion and depression.
4. **Jester (Recreation, Diversion)**
 - Seeking: play, amusement, joking, creative pursuits, sports, games, make-believe.
 - Feeling: relaxation, joy, serenity, ecstasy.
 - Over-activation creates extreme silliness, manic behavior. Under-activation leads to lethargy, depression, inhibition.
5. **Energy Czar (Regulates Need for Energy, Rest, Relaxation)**
 - Seeking: rest, relaxation, nourishment, exercise.
 - Feeling: anticipation, satiety, pleasure, satisfaction.
 - Over- activation creates obsession with stress, relief, sleep, diet, body weight. Under-activation leads to fatigue, exhaustion, depression, weak immune system.

6. **Sentry (Defense, Vigilance)**

- Characterized by: worry, seeking safety, prevention, protection.
- Feeling: apprehension, tension, anxiety, fear.
- Over-activation creates unrealistic fears, phobia, paranoia, over-protectiveness, intense anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorders, hyper-vigilance. Under-activation leads to cavalier behavior, carelessness, unsafe risk-taking.

7. **Nest-Builder (Affiliation, Bonding, Attachment)**

- Seeking: nurturing, caring, forming friendships, expressing affection, experiencing loss and grief.
- Feeling: love, belonging, self-worth, being needed, separation distress, grief.
- Over-activation creates irritability, loss of personal boundaries, martyrdom, panic when faced with separation. Under-activation leads to loneliness, depression, anxiety, trouble healing from loss or grief.

Accepting ourselves and others, and knowing that our brains are wired in different, highly individualized ways, allows us to be more compassionate and tolerant towards ourselves as well as others, which helps build better relationships through understanding and acceptance of our differences. That said, bidding and making connections still may not be that easy, because our emotional command systems are hardwired into the anatomy of our brains. Still, connection is possible, especially when we acknowledge those differences, accept them, and build them into the bidding process. This results in more stable relationships, that are based on common respect for one another's emotional needs – both personally and professionally.

Questions to Consider

Spend some time considering the implications that the following questions hold for your life, your relationships, and the way you make bids for emotional connection:

1. Which of your emotional command systems would you like to use more in your life? What changes would you need to make for this to happen?
2. Which of your emotional command systems would you like to use less in your life? What changes would you need to make for this to happen?
3. How are you different from others, in terms of the way you each use your emotional command systems? And how are you the same?
4. How might the recognition of these differences and similarities help your relationships?
5. How do your differences or similarities affect the way you bid for emotional connection with a particular individual? How do they affect your responses? What changes could you make to improve this process?

Once you're able to understand your own system, the way you perceive things, and the way that impacts your feelings/behavior, you'll be able to work with reality,

particularly if you try to understand how others behave also, why, and how the same behavior can mean different things with different people. It'll allow you to eliminate the sting of negative feelings, which can sink you into the quicksand of self-sabotage. And if you can also take your ego out of the equation, you'll be able to put an end to unnecessary pain and suffering!

At the end of the day, as Maya Angelou put it, *"You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them."*