

Guide 6

Challenging our beliefs promotes resilience



As discussed in Guides 4 and 5, our beliefs about the causes and impact of events are often based on inaccurate thinking patterns. This example illustrates several assumptions that trap a teacher into a spiral of negative thinking:

I feel so tense—I could explode! I promised to take the kids to the park today, but instead I disappointed them completely when we didn't have time to go (personalizing/magnifying the negative). I always get behind (overgeneralizing). I feel so bad—I'm such a lousy teacher. I really wonder if I have what it takes to do this job (overgeneralizing/emotional reasoning).

How can we challenge our beliefs to promote our resilience?

We can assess a situation more accurately and flexibly by challenging our initial thoughts about it. Let's listen to the teacher's internal dialogue as she gathers more accurate and flexible evidence to challenge her beliefs:

Okay, stop ... take three deep breaths. Now, just because we didn't have time to go to the park doesn't mean the children were completely disappointed or that I'm a poor teacher. I did a very good circle this morning. All my planning really paid off; the kids really enjoyed themselves. And, think about it, today we had a fire drill—that took time. I actually stayed pretty calm during the drill even though the kids were getting restless. And Julie needed a lot of extra one-to-one attention when her mom dropped her off. That took some time, but it was worth it because then she had a great time playing with Lisa in the kitchen centre.

I do love working with the kids, but I'm a bit overwhelmed by the extra work caused by the room changes we had to make. The move has caused stress for everyone, and the kids are still reacting. I need to remember that adjusting to change takes time. Maybe I need to build in more time for us all to de-stress. Some calming activities would probably help us all right now.



When this teacher challenges her beliefs, she gathers evidence to get a more accurate picture of why the morning felt so overwhelming. She can see that she isn't a lousy teacher but, in fact, is doing a reasonable job in spite of some real challenges (thereby reducing "Me" thinking). She remembers other reasons why the day went by too quickly. She disputes her first thoughts about being a failure and is able to free herself to see the situation as temporary (reducing "Always" thinking). She doesn't deny the reality of her situation; she doesn't just say that tomorrow will be better. She uses the time to reflect and develop a plan to decrease stress (reducing "Always" and "Everything" thinking). This teacher is demonstrating "realistic optimism" in action.

Explanatory style dimensions as a guide for challenging our beliefs

We can also challenge our thinking habits and traps by regularly asking ourselves questions related to the three dimensions of explanatory style:

Personalization: Who caused the problem?

Ask yourself, "Who is actually responsible? Me? Not me?" It's important to remember that most stressful situations are not 100% the result of just one person. Some problems may be due to you and your actions, but others are not. Then, ask yourself, "What is true *in this case*? What evidence do I have to support my belief?"



Some people find it helpful to think of a pie to challenge “Me”/“Not me” beliefs. Ask yourself, *“How much of the pie is my responsibility? How much of the pie is the responsibility of other people? How much of the pie is due to circumstances outside my control?”*

You can also ask yourself, *“What aspects of the situation can be controlled? What parts of the situation can I do something about?”* This type of questioning encourages you to use the influence you have, which enhances your belief in your ability to steer through challenging situations.

Permanence: How long will this problem last? Always? Not always?

Ask yourself, *“Is this stress really going to last forever?”* Sometimes, it feels like the stress will *never* end. Some stressful situations are permanent, but many are temporary.

Then ask yourself, *“Can I see an end to the stress?”* In the case of temporary situations, such as completing overdue reports or soothing an overwrought child, being accurate about how long the situation may last makes it feel less overwhelming.

Some situations, such as coping with a disability or chronic illness, are permanent. Accepting this helps us put solutions into place to ease the stress. Ask yourself, *“Do I need to reach out for support?”*

Pervasiveness: How much of my life will this problem affect? Everything? Not everything?

Ask yourself, *“Is this stress really going to affect everything in my life? What areas will not be affected?”* For example, a conflict with a co-worker doesn’t mean that the whole day has to be ruined and that relationships with others will be affected.

Emotional regulation and impulse control stop the negative spiral of “Everything” thinking. It’s easier to bounce back when we look for the specific areas of our lives that are affected by the stress, because then the situation feels less overwhelming and more controllable.

Some situations, such as coping with the aftermath of a natural disaster, do have a pervasive effect for a period of time. How do people cope in such horrendous circumstances? The media is full of examples of people finding ways to keep going by reaching out for support or *giving* support to others in greater need.

When we challenge our beliefs, we look for evidence that our assessment of the situation is accurate. Once we check for accuracy, we can exercise our flexible thinking by generating alternative ways to see the situation. This helps us develop other ways of dealing with the situation.

Refer to Section 2, Helping Children Become More Resilient, for suggestions and activities to help children challenge their beliefs.

Please visit www.reachinginreachingout.com, RIRO’s website, to view brief videos on challenging beliefs (Skills Video 4) and generating alternatives (Skills Video 5).

What does one teacher say about challenging beliefs?

I noticed that I was making statements to myself like “I’m a terrible teacher” when something didn’t go as I would have liked it to with a child or activity. Now, I’m in the habit of challenging that belief right away. I think of all the things I did with the children and in my programming that were successful. It helps me not get stuck feeling down ...

I have found that an “Always” belief like “We can never play together” can be disputed in very concrete terms: “Remember, you played with J at the sand table this morning. What else did you do with J today?” I noticed that if I use this kind of conversation as a strategy, I can relate my knowledge of “thinking style” habits into understandable concepts.

—AB (preschool/kindergarten)

Summary of Guide 6

Challenging our beliefs promotes resilience



How can we challenge our beliefs to promote our resilience?

- 1) We can challenge our initial responses to a situation, and check if we are jumping to conclusions or making assumptions.
- 2) We can routinely ask ourselves the following questions related to the three dimensions of explanatory style:
 - *Who is actually responsible? How much responsibility is really mine?*
Most stresses are not 100% the result of one person's failings or actions.
 - *Is this stress really going to last forever? Can I see an end to the stress?*
Many stresses are temporary.
 - *Is this stress really going to affect everything in my life? What areas will not be affected?*
The effects of many daily adversities are limited to one or two areas of our lives.
It is easier to bounce back when we see that a situation affects only part of our lives.