

# Guide 3

## Understanding our response to stress and adversity



Caught in a traffic jam, one person will honk the horn in anger, another will turn on some quiet music and wait, while still another will be flooded with anxiety about being late. Why do people have different reactions to circumstances that happen?

Many of us believe that negative events cause us to act in certain ways. However, in Guide 1, we introduced a different reason for our reactions to stressful circumstances. Research tells us that our reactions are based on how we think about the situation or event.

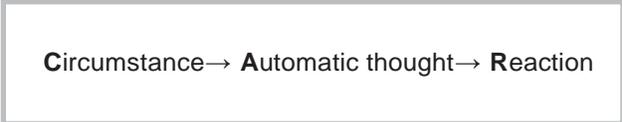
When something happens, we have automatic thoughts about why it happened. These thoughts cause our reaction—how we feel and what we do.

### The CAR model

We use the acronym CAR to help make sense of why we react the way we do to circumstances in our lives. Here's how the CAR model works:

- **C** is the **circumstance**—the situation or event.
- **A** is our **automatic thought**—our interpretation about why the situation happened.
- **R** is our **reaction**—the feelings and actions that our automatic thoughts set into motion.

*Adapted from the ABC Model by Albert Ellis* <sup>22</sup>



Here's an example:

*Mary-Jo has been consciously living a healthy lifestyle for more than two months. She finds out that she wasn't invited to a party at school, but her friend Janice was invited. Mary-Jo thinks to herself, Janice always gets invited to things; I never do. I am such a loser—nobody likes me. She feels very sad, doesn't go out jogging, and eats a carton of ice cream instead.*



### So how does CAR work in this scenario?

**Circumstance** = didn't get invited to the party to which her friend was invited

**Automatic thought** = "I am such a loser—nobody likes me."

**Reaction** = feels sad, even depressed. Has no motivation to go jogging and eats a carton of ice cream despite her focus on healthier living.

### Here is another reaction:

Another person, Anna, reacts differently to the same situation:

*That's disappointing, but I actually don't know Nancy very well. Janice knows her far better. That's probably why I wasn't invited. Maybe next time I'll be invited. Anna goes for a run, then invites a girlfriend over to watch a new comedy series they both enjoy.*



The circumstance (**C**) remains the same, but Anna's automatic thoughts (**A**) are different. She believes the reason she didn't get invited to the party is because, "I don't know Nancy very well. Maybe next time I'll be invited." Anna lets go of her initial disappointment and goes on with her day in a positive way (**R**).



Using the CAR model can help us develop key resiliency abilities discussed in Guide 2, such as emotional regulation, impulse control, causal analysis, and empathy.

### HOW TO USE THE CAR MODEL

Vividly recall a recent stressful event. Follow the CAR sequence as shown below. Alternatively, after recording the C, fill in the R, then the A. Choose the method that works best for you.

- **C:** Describe the event objectively. Answer these questions: Who? What? Where? When?
- **A:** Record your Automatic thoughts about caused the event. Why do you think it happened?
- **R:** Record your feelings and actions.

### Thought-Feeling Connections

Our automatic thoughts are formed from a wide array of our past experiences and what is happening in our lives right now. That's why we have such a personal response to situations that happen. Our thinking is very subjective!

However, research shows that there are common thought-feeling connections that people predictably and universally experience. The chart below shows several thought-feeling connections that are commonly experienced during stressful circumstances.

#### Thought-Feeling Connections

Thought	Feeling
violation of our rights	→ anger
actual loss or loss of self-worth	→ sadness, depression
future threat	→ anxiety, fear
violation of another's rights	→ guilt
loss of standing with others	→ embarrassment

Adapted from "B-C Connections" in Reivich & Shatté. 2002. *The Resilience Factor*. New York: Broadway Books (paperback, 2003, Three Rivers Press), p. 75.

The chart shows that if we believe that our rights have been violated—for example, if we think that we've been treated unjustly or disrespectfully—this will lead to feelings of anger. Thoughts about loss will cause sadness, perhaps even depression. When we think something negative is going to happen (future threat) we feel anxious and fearful.

### How can we use the Thought-Feeling Connections to understand our reactions?

Sometimes it's hard to identify what we are thinking; we often have an easier time labelling our *feelings*. The Thought-Feeling Connections can be used in reverse to help us identify our automatic thoughts. For example, feelings of guilt are often aroused when we believe that we have violated another person's rights. We feel embarrassed when we believe that we have lost standing in another's eyes. Thought-Feeling Connections help us increase our self-awareness—an important first step to responding to adversity with resilience.

Refer to Section 2, "Helping Children Build Their Resilience" for information about using the Thought-Feeling Connections with children.

### What do teachers say about using the CAR model and Thought-Feeling Connections?

*Using the CAR model helped me identify my automatic thoughts when I'm upset, mad, etc. It helped me look at things more positively. It led to looking for alternatives to solve the problem and helped me be calmer in a situation that is hard to handle. —YZ (kindergarten)*

*The CAR model allows me to be reflective about my responses. —TH (supervisor)*

*Using the process of thinking through what the problem is, step by step, helps me know more exactly what my automatic thoughts are. It simplifies things. —KH (kindergarten-preschool)*

# Summary of Guide 3



## Understanding our response to stress and adversity

### *Why do people have different reactions to adversity and stress?*

- Our thoughts about adversity cause our reactions—how we feel and what we do in stressful situations.
- A simple model called CAR can help us understand the connection between the circumstance (C), our automatic thoughts (A), and our emotions and actions (R).

Circumstance → Automatic thoughts → Reaction

- Sometimes our automatic thoughts about a situation are not accurate, and our reactions undermine our ability to respond with resilience.
- We can use the CAR model to identify our automatic thoughts and, if necessary, challenge whether they are true.
- Using Thought-Feeling Connections can help us identify our thinking. If we know what our emotional reactions are, we can identify our automatic thoughts, e.g., sadness = loss; anxiety = future threat; anger = violation of our rights.

### Thought-Feeling Connections

Thought	Feeling
violation of our rights	anger
actual loss or loss of self-worth	sadness, depression
future threat	anxiety, fear
violation of another's rights	guilt
loss of standing with others	embarrassment

Adapted from "B-C Connections" in Reivich & Shatté. 2002. *The Resilience Factor*. New York: Broadway Books (paperback, 2003, Three Rivers Press), p. 75.