

Guide 4

Thinking style—thinking habits that affect our resilience



Our research has demonstrated that the number-one roadblock to resilience is not genetics, not childhood experiences, not a lack of opportunity or wealth. The principal obstacle to tapping into our inner strength lies with our thinking style.³

What is “thinking style”?

Researchers have found that the explanation people give for their successes and failures influences whether they persevere or give up when faced with adversity.³⁰

Dr. Martin Seligman, a social psychologist, and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania have studied the development of resilience for more than thirty years. Most notable is their research into people’s beliefs about personal adversity, challenge, and success. Seligman listened to thousands of people explain why things that happened to them. He concluded that people develop *thinking habits*, preferred ways of viewing the world. Seligman terms these habits a person’s “explanatory style” or “thinking style.” He suggests that our thinking style can help or hinder our ability to respond to inevitable bumps in the road with resilience.⁴

How does our thinking style affect our resilience?

Our thinking style comes into play as we try to determine *why* things happen and *what impact* they will have. Our style can “bias and color our viewpoint, leading us to develop patterns of behavior that can be self-defeating.”³

Our thinking style may be the same at home, at work, and on the social scene, or it may vary according to our roles and relationships in these environments. The important thing about thinking style is that it causes us to react *out of habit* and jump to conclusions that may not be accurate. This, in turn, prevents us from using the kind of flexible thinking that promotes problem solving and positive change.

Seligman’s research shows that people unconsciously jump to conclusions in order to make sense of *why* things happen and what the *effect* will be. These conclusions relate to what Seligman calls the three dimensions of

explanatory or thinking style: personalization, permanence, and pervasiveness.^{3, 4}

- **Personalization:**
Who /what caused this to happen:
Me Not me
- **Permanence:**
How long this will last:
Always Not always
- **Pervasiveness:**
How much of my life this will affect:
Everything Not everything

Thinking habits associated with depression

Think back to Guide 3. Remember Mary-Jo’s beliefs about why she wasn’t invited to the party? Let’s look at her automatic thoughts again to help understand the concept of thinking style:

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’s explanation for not being invited was:

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.

This explanation is typical of “Me/Always/Everything” thinking—a thinking pattern related to “pessimistic” thinking. Researchers say that routine use of automatic thoughts like these can lead to depression and a loss of hope.³

With the “Me” statement “*I am such a loser*,” Mary-Jo shows that she takes the situation personally and blames herself for not being invited to the party. The statement is also an example of “Always” and “Everything” thinking: If Mary-Jo is innately a loser,



many aspects of her life will be affected, and there is little hope for change.

People who habitually blame themselves often believe that stressful situations are permanent. This belief affects many areas of their lives, or is pervasive.

Understandably, they tend to give up more easily because things seem so overwhelming and hopeless. It is hard to respond with resilience to stressful situations with “Me/Always/Everything” habits of thinking.

Thinking habits associated with aggression

“Not me/Always/Everything” thinking can also prevent a resilient response to stressful situations. People with “Not me” thinking have a habit of blaming others and taking little responsibility for situations. If “Not me” thinking is paired with “Always” and “Everything” thinking, people can experience a sense of futility when things go wrong. But instead of leading to depression, this thinking style can make people feel trapped and angry, causing them to lash out at others.

An extreme version of this pattern can be seen in people who act out or engage in delinquent behaviour.¹⁸

We’ll use the same example of the party to illustrate how a “Not me/Always/Everything” thinking style might look. Here’s how another person, Katina, explained why she wasn’t invited to a party to which her friend was invited:

Janice always gets invited to things; I never do. People are such snobs! Katina becomes angry, phones the host of the party, and tells her off. Then, she calls for a pizza, gets into an argument with the person on the phone, and ends up cancelling the order. Katina’s frustration mounts. She skips her regular jog, and goes to bed without eating.



Katina gets angry because she blames the situation on others. Since she is using “Always” and “Everything” thinking, she believes the situation is futile. Her anger spills into other areas of her life—she yells at the pizza delivery operator. And instead of exercising, she skips dinner and goes to bed.

Thinking habits associated with optimism

Another thinking habit is important to note here: “Not me/Not always/Not everything” thinking. To see this style in action, let’s take another look at Anna’s explanation for not being invited to the party.

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, and invites a girlfriend over to watch a comedy series they both enjoy.

Anna believes that Nancy didn’t invite her to the party because they don’t know each other that well yet, a “Not me” explanation. She sees the situation as temporary. This “Not always,” view causes her to think that she might be included in a future social event when she and Nancy know each other better. Anna continues with her healthy lifestyle activities and her relationships with other people. These indicate that not being invited to the party is specific and doesn’t affect “everything” in her life.



The key to resilient thinking habits—accurate and flexible thinking

While a “Not me/Not always/Not everything” style may be the most “optimistic” explanatory style, it may not be an accurate or realistic view of a situation. People who use this style out of habit run the risk of losing out on genuine relationships, since their optimistic outlook might ignore difficult issues that exist between themselves and others. In addition, they may be doing themselves a disservice during times of serious adversity, such as when they are experience a health problem, and their habit of seeing situations positively prevents them from seeking help.

The goal is to maintain a sense of *realistic optimism* by thinking as accurately and flexibly as possible about each situation we face. In the next guide, we discuss several common thinking traps that contribute to our thinking style and restrict our resilience.

WHAT'S YOUR THINKING STYLE?

Reflect on these questions:

- In times of stress, do I often blame myself when things go wrong? (“Me” thinking)
- Do I often blame someone else or the circumstances? (“Not me” thinking)
- Do I often feel as if stressful situations will be permanent and all encompassing? (“Always/Everything” thinking)
- Do I typically look for aspects of stressful situations that are temporary and specific? (“Not always/Not everything” thinking)

Refer to Section 2, Helping Children Build Their Resilience, for suggestions and activities concerning children’s emerging thinking styles.

Please visit www.reachinginreachingout.com, RIRO’s website, to view a brief video on explanatory style (Skills Video 3).

What do teachers say about increasing awareness of their explanatory styles?

I used to habitually have a “Me” response to situations at work, and put in long hours taking responsibility for things that I didn’t need to. After the training, I find myself delegating more, and this has encouraged more of a team effort amongst the staff. —LD (supervisor)

Before understanding explanatory style, if something went wrong first thing in the morning, I would immediately think to myself, “Oh no! This is going to be a hard day.” Now I don’t use such permanent thinking. I just take the day as it comes and see what happens. —BM (preschool)

Summary of Guide 4



Thinking Style—thinking habits that affect our resilience

What is thinking style?

Research shows that the explanations people give for their successes and failures influences whether they persevere or give up when faced with stressful situations.

Social psychologist and researcher Dr. Martin Seligman says that people develop thinking habits, preferred ways of viewing themselves and the world. Seligman terms these habits a person's "explanatory style" or "thinking style." These habits can help or hinder our ability to respond to adversity with resilience.

How does our thinking style affect our resilience?

Thinking style thinking habits are

- explanations we develop for *why* things happen and *what impact* they will have
- *not necessarily* accurate assessments of the stressful situation

Seligman's research shows that people try to make meaning of the things that happen to them and unconsciously make assumptions related to three dimensions of thinking style—personalization, permanence, and pervasiveness.

- **Personalization:** Who /what caused this to happen:

Me *Not me*

- **Permanence:** How long this will last:

Always *Not always*

- **Pervasiveness:** How much of my life this will affect:

Everything *Not everything*

Our thinking style is a mix of these three dimensions. Each style is associated with a habitual response to stressful situations. Here are a few examples of thinking styles:

- "Me/Always/Everything" = helplessness, giving up, depression
- "Not me/Always/Everything" = lack of responsibility, anger, acting out, hopelessness
- "Not me/Not always/Not everything" = more optimistic behaviour, but can be inaccurate

To increase our capacity for resilience, we need to challenge our thinking styles on each dimension by thinking accurately and flexibly about each situation we face.

Challenging thinking style → Increased resilience