

# Guide 6

## Challenging our thinking 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 thinking 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 calms herself and gathers more accurate and flexible evidence to challenge her thinking:

*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 putting puzzles together with Lisa.*

*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 thinking, 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.

### **Thinking style dimensions as a guide for challenging our thoughts**

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

#### **Personalization: Who caused the problem?**

Ask yourself, "Who or what is actually responsible? It's important to remember that most stressful situations are not 100% the result of just one person. Instead of habitually blaming yourself or someone else, stop for a moment. 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 shape to avoid the blame game. Ask yourself, “*How much of the pie is due to my actions? How much of the pie is due to the actions 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?**

Sometimes, it feels like the stress will never end. Some situations *are* permanent, but many are temporary.

Ask yourself, “*Is this stressful situation really going to last forever?*” Situations such as completing overdue reports or soothing an overwrought child can feel less overwhelming when we acknowledge that the situation is temporary. Being more accurate about how long the situation will last can reduce our stress.

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?**

Ask yourself, “*Is this stressful situation really going to affect everything in my life? What areas are not 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 aspects causing our stress. It makes the situation feel 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 and handle the situation.

Refer to Section 2, Helping Children Build Their Resilience, for suggestions and activities to help children challenge their beliefs.

Please visit [www.reachinginreachingout.com](http://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 our thinking?**

*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 thinking promotes resilience



### *How can we challenge our thoughts 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 due to me? to others?*  
Most stresses are not 100% the result of one person's failings or actions.
  - *Is this stress really going to last forever?*  
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.