

*The*  
ABCs  
*of*  
EMOTIONAL  
MASTERY

Manage Your Moods,  
Build Resilience And  
Create What *Truly* Matters

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and  
*Simplicity and Success*

## Disclaimer

This publication is designed to be accurate to the best of the author's knowledge. It is not designed to provide psychological advice, or to substitute for professional counsel in that area. No guarantee of any specific outcome is provided for utilizing the ideas in this e-book. Your results will depend on your circumstances, application, effort, and ability.

**If you feel seriously depressed—or have any thoughts about suicide or otherwise harming yourself—tell someone: your doctor, a friend, your parents, a minister, priest, rabbi, coach, teacher—anyone.**

If you don't know who to call, most local telephone directories include the number for a "crisis line" on the first page, under emergency numbers. You will not have to give them your name, if you don't want to. So call.

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STAYING UP IN DOWN TIMES – AND BEYOND

# INTRODUCTION

## *IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE?*

*"Tell me, what will you do with your one wild and precious life?"*

Mary Oliver, Poet

Do you ever feel stuck? Stalled? Overwhelmed? Not sure what to do next? Unsure what you want to get done, or why? Does your body get the blues?

Perhaps life and work seem fragmented, disconnected. Or maybe you're wandering in transition, not clear about your purpose or direction.

Do you feel stressed, anxious, or depressed? Are you working too hard for too little? Perhaps you are doing fine— but not at what you would really love to do?

Sadly, many clients tell me their lives feel like a never-ending stream of problems and adversity. Negative about the present, pessimistic about the future, they're so focused on problems, they don't have time to think about what matters or what they really want in life.

How about you? Do you ever feel that this is all there is to life? Or work?

If you do—and it frightens or depresses you more—you are not alone.

Most of us, wrote Henry David Thoreau (in 1854), "live lives of quiet desperation."

### **An Epidemic Of Depression**

Now, more than ever, Thoreau's claim rings true. In these complex, rapidly-changing times, a growing sense of helplessness, even hopelessness pervades many lives.

In 2001, Nicci Gerrard wrote, "More ... people die of depression than of AIDS, heart disease, pneumonia, cancer and strokes put together. Fifteen percent of people who are depressed eventually kill themselves."<sup>1</sup>

Today, the US National Institute of Mental Health says, "20.9 million American adults, or about 9.5 percent of the U.S. population age 18 and older ... have a mood disorder."<sup>2</sup> As well, 16 to 20 percent of teens suffer ... from depression.<sup>3</sup>

By 2020, depression could be the second most common health problem in the world.<sup>4</sup>

"We are in an epidemic of depression," says Positive Psychologist Martin Seligman.<sup>5</sup>

There also appears to be an epidemic of stress and anxiety.

The US National Institute of Mental Health reports that 18 percent of adults will experience anxiety in any given year. About 29 percent will experience it in their lifetime.<sup>6</sup>

Physician/psychologist Joan Borysenko says, "75 to 90 percent of visits to the family doctor are for conditions caused or made worse by stress."<sup>7</sup>

That's the bad news. There is also good news.

If you develop new skills and practices, you can change how you feel and act.

### **Half Your Happiness Is Up To You**

Genes incline some toward optimism. Others tend toward pessimism. Positive Psychologists argue that genetics accounts for only about 50 percent of either. What you do with the rest is up to you.

There is a lot you can do with your fifty percent. Many, like me, learn to deal with pessimism, anxiety, depression and emotional distress. If you work at it, you can, too.

Even if you are more pessimist than optimist, mastering the generic emotional mastery and creating skills outlined here can help you manage your moods and build the resilience needed to face change and adversity—and succeed.

Mastering these skills can help you see that life is less about solving problems and more about creating the kind of life, work and relationships you most deeply want.

### **Generic Skills Are Key**

When most people hear the word "generic," they think of no-name products. Or cheap pharmaceuticals.

With regard to skills, though, "generic" means higher-order; applicable to a wide range of challenges. Generic comes from the Latin "genus." It shares that root with "generate."

In changing times, generic skills empower you to generate and manage specific skills—writing, accounting, building, making music, rock climbing, and gardening.

Examples of generic skills: self-motivation, courage, effective communication, patience, purpose, persistence, deliberative practice, creating and emotional mastery.

Emotional mastery is the ability to manage your thoughts and emotions and control the actions and results that flow from them.

The **ABCs** (described later) is key to emotional mastery. It helps you see how thoughts precede emotions. And how emotions effect actions and results.

Creating is the capacity to bring into being deeply-desired results. Creating skills enable you to create what you want, with whatever you have to start with.

Deep, deliberate practice makes it easier to develop and apply generic and specific skills. It too, can be learned and mastered.

Combined, these skills empower you to manage your moods and create results that matter. Creating makes you feel good, and leads to authentic confidence. Such confidence enhances emotional mastery, which makes it easier to create results.

Mastering these skills enables you to make the most of the 50% of happiness you control. I know. I've been through most of the negative stuff described above and come out the other side reasonably creative, successful and happy. I'm far from perfect and continue to practice my skills. I am able to rise to most life challenges successfully.

If you practice, you, too, can change your stories, your moods and your results.

## Where We're Going In This Ebook

### Part One: Why?

In **Part One**, we'll examine the basics of emotional mastery. We'll see why they're needed, and how they relate to adversity, change and creating.

In **Chapter 1**, we'll start by looking at the definition and a description of **Emotional Mastery**. I'll outline the basic skills that underlie it, and the benefits it brings.

In **Chapter 2**, we'll look at **The Challenge Of Adversity**. We'll see how generic skills can help us embrace our challenges and succeed in spite of difficulties.

In **Chapter 3**, we'll see why **problem-solving** is not a sufficient strategy for dealing with change and challenge. And why much distress is caused by misplaced problem-solving. We'll also look at the skills that enable us to rise above problems and create what matters.

### Part Two: What?

In **Part Two**, we'll examine skills that comprise emotional mastery, and how to apply them.

In **Chapter 4**, we'll explore **explanatory style**—how we explain adversity. We'll compare pessimistic and optimistic styles, and the feelings and results each produces.

In **Chapter 5**, I'll introduce the **ABCs of Emotional Mastery** technique. You'll learn how your thoughts and beliefs precede and give rise to your feelings, actions and results.

In **Chapter 6**, I'll show you how to practice the **ABCs**, and change negative thoughts and beliefs into realistically positive ones. I'll show you how changing your feelings, actions and results will help you move more easily and elegantly in the direction of your dreams.

### **Part Three: How?**

Practice is key to all success, but often overlooked. In **Part Three**, you'll see that practice multiplies skill and talent.

In **Chapter 7**, I'll show how **regular, deliberate practice** increases emotional mastery and grit—your ability to persevere in support of passions—in spite of what life throws you.

In **Chapter 8**, I'll **pull the threads together** using an example of a gifted young athlete who suffered a potential career ending injury. I'll show how he found the gift in adversity and used it to create a rich, focused and flourishing life.

In the **Appendices**, I provide a **form** and **template** with which to practice the **ABCs**.

By the end of this book, I hope you'll have a clearer sense that life—and you—are not problems that have to be "solved." Rather, I hope you'll see that creating the life you truly want is a challenge to be embraced with your newly-developed skills and practices.



PART

1

## WHY?

*"If you've ever wondered **Why do we feel emotions?** or **What difference does it make if I look on the bright side?** I can tell you.*

*The latest science shows how our day-to-day emotional experiences  
affect the very course of our lives."*

— Barbara Fredrickson, *Positivity*

## CHAPTER 1

# EMOTIONAL MASTERY

## *What Is It? Why Do We Need it?*

*"There is a vitality in us, a sparkle—a bonfire, actually—that cannot be extinguished by any tragedy. Something in us, an urge toward wholeness, a passion for evolving, makes us go on, start over, not give up, not give in."*

—David Richo

When most clients come to me, they still have enough "sparkle" to ask for help. But, stuck, stalled or unclear about their desired destinations, their bonfire is diminished.

Vague about the results they want to create, and fearful of setting themselves up for failure, some are even afraid to ask what they truly want.

Most tend to see change, adversity, setbacks and struggles as "problems" they need to fight: to overcome, get rid of, or, at least, get relief from.

As you'll see, though, fighting "problems" rarely works. It feels bad, is hard to sustain and often backfires.

A key to my coaching is stoking my clients' bonfires by helping them clarify their most deeply desired results and highest aspirations. I also help them develop the emotional mastery and creating skills they need to bring those results into being.

### **What Is Emotional Mastery?**

"Emotion" means "a strong mental or instinctive feeling; a disturbance such as fear or love." The word comes from the French for "to excite," and the Latin for "to move."

Emotions excite us. They move us to action. We usually move away from negative emotions, toward positive ones. We need both but not in balance.

To achieve emotional mastery, Positive Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson says we need at least three times as many positive emotions as negative ones.<sup>8</sup>

That's the tipping point: three to one, or better.

On the low side (less than 3:1) lies a slippery slope leading toward anxiety, depression and despair. On the high side (more than 3:1), there's an exhilarating rise toward emotional skillfulness, flourishing and fulfillment.

"Mastery," comes from the word "master," which means "to control; to be skilled, to have comprehensive knowledge or use of."

My favourite description of mastery comes from author George Leonard who, in his fifties, became a fifth-degree, black belt Aikido master.

"Mastery," he wrote, is "the mysterious process during which what is at first difficult becomes progressively easier and more pleasurable through practice."<sup>9</sup>

**Emotional Mastery**, then, is the capacity to recognize and use your emotions effectively. It helps you embrace and rise above what you don't like and don't want. It helps you to focus on what you truly do want.

Emotional Mastery includes the competence and confidence to manage moods, and persistently pursue passions—independent of problems, circumstances or setbacks.

### **Why Is Emotional Mastery Important?**

If you let yourself be pushed around by negative emotions, you're likely to produce negative results, or no results.

The person who is often anxious and worried lacks emotional mastery. As do those who see only the bad in things. The person who angers quickly, and focuses on who is at fault rather than what's next, and the person who can't get anything done because s/he feels "overwhelmed" could benefit from increased emotional skillfulness.

Confident, well-tested athletes possess emotional mastery. Relaxed, focused nurses and teachers display it. The Dali Lama radiates world-class emotional mastery.

If you master your emotions, you will more likely be moved by positive emotions to take positive action and create positive results.

As you do, you will shed or dissolve the worst of the distress you experience. In its place you'll find useful caution, reasonable sadness, temporary upset and positive emotions such as calm, joy, love, exuberance, gratitude, and compassion.

Don't be afraid, as Dante was, that if you lose your demons, you'll lose your angels. You won't. Your emotions will become more honest and authentic; more helpful.

With emotional mastery, you will think more realistically and feel more optimistic. You'll be better equipped to create what matters to you—with whatever you have to work with.

**A Stable, Solid Base**

Emotional mastery is not the end-all of human development. It is part of an integral system of mental, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual development. For most of us, it is a strategic place to intervene in that system.

Emotional mastery provides a solid, stable foundation upon which to create the life you long for. Together with the creating skills and deep practice, it can lead to a robust awareness that "I can do." And to an authentic sense of confidence.

From that confident "can-do" base, you will find it easier accept the challenge of change. Even in the face of the adversity, your bonfire will continue to burn.

Climbing life's mountains, you will be less likely to quit or camp; more likely to keep on, regardless of the difficulties you encounter.<sup>10</sup>

And to enjoy a productive, thriving journey.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE CHALLENGE OF ADVERSITY

*"In the midst of winter,  
I finally learned  
there was in me an invincible summer."*

—Albert Camus

Life is changing. Work is changing. Families are changing. The economy is changing. The climate is changing. Even the rate of change is changing.

Many feel at the mercy of circumstances. Buffeted by change, they are unable to cope with what life throws them. Only a few have what it takes to meet the challenge of adversity.

Many camp. Thinking that what they want is not possible, they settle for what they have.

Others quit. Stuck, stalled, drifting, they fail to create what they care about. Many escape into ruts and routines: TV. Over-eating. Facebook, Twitter and video games. Alcohol and other drugs. Over-work to keep fear or sadness at bay.

These fixes are temporary. Often the cure is worse than the disease.

"There may be no greater threat to our future livelihood and survival of the species," says Paul Stoltz, author of *Adversity Quotient*, "than the epidemic of quitting and the commensurate loss of hope that is provoked by a mounting wall of adversity."<sup>11</sup>

## Your Emotional State Matters

Many clients don't realize, at first, that their emotional state can get in the way of creating results. They think they feel bad because they can't create what matters. In fact, it is both.

Inability to create results makes you feel bad. Feeling bad saps your energy and erodes your motivation. It makes it harder to create results, which makes you feel worse.

This cycle can quickly turn into a nasty downward spiral. The best time to intervene and develop new skills and habits is before you start to slide down that slippery slope.

Although potentially at risk, most of my clients are relatively successful. They come to me because they are temporarily unable to take life's adversity and use it to create what matters.

I've worked, for example, with:

- People in transition, dealing with job loss, divorce, death of a loved one, a move to a new city, a new job and even the "empty nest" syndrome.
- Those mired in soul-sucking jobs who feel stuck because they have to pay for stuff they fear they might not need or want.
- People struggling to find that illusory "life/work balance," only to oscillate (see-saw) between one or the other.
- Individuals who have tried diets and fitness crazes, yo-yo-ing between their desired weight and fitness level and being heavy and out of shape.
- Business people who excel at their work yet find no meaning or purpose in it.
- Creatives—artists, writers, photographers, filmmakers, craftspeople and others—who can't make a decent living from what they create.
- Professionals who wake up in their 40's or 50's, feeling "trapped in a job chosen by a naïve 17-year old."
- Aspiring entrepreneurs who lack the generic skills and organizing framework to turn their visions into reality.
- Life coaches who invested heavily in training and certification, yet can't fill their practices, or earn a decent income.
- Athletes who suffer potential career-ending injuries, and fear for their future. Others who are good, but don't yet know how to turn good into great. And those leaving their sport who don't know where they'll go, or how.
- Women and men in their 50's and 60's who worry that their best years are past, and fear it might be all down hill from here.
- Young people in their 20's and 30's who struggle to get traction in a changing (shrinking?) job market.

Many are doing well, but, often, not at what they truly want to do. Others claim they don't have a clue about what they want, and would love to figure it out.

Almost all lack the generic skills and dynamic organizing framework within which to envision and create results that matter.

### **Specific Skills Are No Longer Sufficient**

Most of my clients are competent in the specific fields they trained for. When life and work are relatively simple and routine, those skills work well.

With too much adversity—when life or work become non-routine, complex, even chaotic—they hit the limits of those skills, and stall. They feel overwhelmed; stuck.

Too many assume that specific skills are all they need to create success.

"Give a person a fish," we're told, "and they eat for today. Teach them how to fish, and they'll never go hungry."

Useful advice in the last century. But now? In these rapidly changing times?

Tell it to fishers in Newfoundland or Chile where fish stocks collapsed.

Tell it to loggers where the forest industry has disappeared.

Tell it to North Americans who lost good-paying jobs to low-wage, offshore competitors. Tell it to record companies, bookstores and typewriter manufacturers.

Teaching people to fish, or do any specific job, is still necessary. By itself, though, it is no longer enough to guarantee that you'll never go hungry. If you want to succeed in the face of increasing adversity, you must master both **specific** and **generic** skills.

## The New Basics

Generic skills—high-level, transferable, widely-applicable, self-starting, self-organizing, self-managing, self-regulating, self-learning and sophisticated doing/creating skills—enable us to take almost anything life gives us, and use it as raw material to create results.

Most of my clients lack (or are unaware of) the basic skills of emotional mastery and creating. Nor are they aware of the power of deliberate practice.

## Creating Skills

Without the following **creating** skills, trying to fix problems or bring into being the future you most want can become a frustrating and fruitless struggle. You need:

- The ability to recognize the differences between problem-solving and creating, and the different results that each leads to;
- The ability to determine purpose, meaning and direction in life and work;
- The ability to craft clear and compelling visions of desired results;
- The ability to objectively assess the current state of a desired result, including what already works and what doesn't; what you have, and don't have, yet;
- The ability to embrace the gap between vision and reality in a way that energizes and guides your actions toward your envisioned result;

- The ability to align visions, values and actions so you make choices and decisions that consistently support your desired results;
- The ability to consciously, deliberately learn from your experience, including mistakes, setbacks and failure—to create and adjust, create and adjust...;
- Finally, you need the grit and emotional mastery to stick with the creating process and finish fully.

Most clients also lack a generic organizing structure—a dynamic planning framework—with which to bring desired results into being. So they default to problem-solving. Unfortunately, problem-solving is inadequate for most of the life/work challenges they grapple with.

The creating structure is senior to problem-solving. It can embrace problems as part of reality, and empower you to rise above them by creating desired results.

Although they know how to create some things, most don't consciously know how they do it. So mixing up problem-solving and creating, they fail to get the full benefits of either.

We won't go into the creating approach in great detail here. For a full overview, and how to apply it, see my free ebook [THRIVE! Creating What Matters In Challenging Times and Beyond](#). For more detail, see: [Simplicity and Success: Creating The Life You Long For](#).

### **Emotional Mastery Skills**

Many of my clients also lack the emotional mastery skills with which to:

- Manage their moods and emotions,
- Soothe negative feelings,
- Create positive emotions,
- Accept what they can't control, and control what they can,
- Take ownership of results, rather than blame others, self or circumstances,
- Limit adversity's reach into their life, work and relationships,
- Accurately estimate how long an adversity will endure, and
- Apply the "grit" and resilience needed to bounce back from setbacks, learn from failure, and persist with difficult tasks until mastered.

Lack of these skills makes it difficult to assess current reality. Without a firm grounding in reality, action can become reaction. Reacting rarely leads to real and lasting results.

### **Deliberate Practice As A Generic Skill**

Finally, most clients don't grasp the impact of deep, deliberate practice.



In our "quick fix" society we lack an appreciation for mastery. We don't grasp the amount of time and energy it takes to master a complex skill. We don't realize that, as guitarist Dave Navarro said, "It takes twenty years to become an "overnight success."

In fields as diverse as chess, sports, and music, Florida State's K. Anders Ericsson found that what separated the great from the good was 10,000 hours of deliberate practice.<sup>12</sup>

Although you may not seek to be world class, deliberate practice is also needed to get unstuck, on track and consistently moving toward the results you truly want to create.

To turn okay into good, and good into great, you not only have to practice; you also have to practice practicing. Knowing how to practice deliberately is a key generic skill.

Lacking these basic generic skills, many flounder, fail and feel down, or defeated.

### **More Troubles Than We Need**

Lacking the skills to consciously create results, unable to manage emotions, hooked on problem-solving and unaware of the impact of practice, is it any wonder so many see adversity as a problem to fight or flee?

Is it any wonder so few see it as a challenge, an opportunity to learn, grow and create?

Can you see why the stats show that so many of us struggle in these troubled times?

### **Andre's Struggles At Work**

Andre\* was a bright young man from a wealthy family—top of his business class.

Using family contacts, he landed a job with an international financial firm. He thought he'd quickly move up the corporate ladder. Instead, he faltered, drifted off course and lost a promotion. When he started working with me, his job was in jeopardy.

Andre had not realized that he would have to learn on the job, or compete with others who'd been top of their class. Although his research and retention skills were excellent, he lacked the generic skills for initiating, organizing and implementing projects, and for managing his moods and emotions.

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\* Andre and Sally are not these clients' real names. As with all of the client examples in this book, I've changed the names and some specific aspects of their stories to avoid identifying them.

He didn't know how to chunk large projects into small, strategic sub-results with small, manageable tasks. Nor did he know how to organize actions and results so they aligned and accumulated into completed results that matched his visions. Multiple tasks stymied him.

As well, Andre's pessimistic way of explaining setbacks and mistakes generated negative emotions that clouded his judgement. It made him anxious and depressed. His language—peppered with absolute words such as "always," "never," "all," "totally"—was more judgemental than descriptive. It generated negativity that added to Andre's misery.

Focused on negative thoughts and feelings, Andre started to feel as if he'd never succeed, never make friends, never achieve his goals. He told himself he was becoming a complete failure in work, and life.

Stressed by what seemed an "overwhelming" challenge, he withdrew. Isolating himself from others, he did the minimum needed to maintain his job, and slipped into a deep and fearful sadness. That's the state in which I met him via telephone.

### **Sally's Blindness To Her Own Feelings**

Sally was keen to start a small business and stuck in the early phases of that challenge.

Although she considered herself an "always positive person who never gets upset," she wasn't clear what kind of business she wanted. Or why. And seemed to me to get upset easily.

She, too, used strong, judgemental language. She blamed others when things went wrong. For example, she blamed her poorly-planned, quickly-abandoned entrepreneurial attempts on what she perceived as her husband's lack of support.

After several such failed business attempts, and struck by the contrast between her "always positive" view of herself and my view of her as easily frustrated and quick to quit, I asked Sally to do the **ABCs** exercise I'll describe in Chapters 5 and 6.

The **ABCs** helps you examine your reactions: anger, irritation, frustration, anxiety, depression, fear. It helps you see how you explain what happens. It helps you change self-defeating explanations to self-supporting ones.

Doing the **ABCs** helps you objectively describe (not judge) your reality. It takes the negative emotional charge off your descriptions of what happens, and who did what.

Sally refused to do the exercise. She couldn't, because, she said, "I just don't get upset."

Not ready to confront her judgement and anger toward her husband, I asked her to think of small hassles or every-day irritations, and practice the **ABCs** on them.

"I can't," she repeated, "because there aren't any." Then, with her voice rising in tone and volume, she added, "I told you, I'm a very positive person. I don't get irritated."

This impasse was difficult for both of us. I came close to ending our relationship.

## **My Struggle With Negative Emotions**

I know what Andre, Sally and others go through when they lack emotional mastery and creating skills. I've been there, too. And it nearly killed me.

Thirty years ago, I taught high school. I loved teaching, but I hated "the system" and what I felt forced to do. I could see no way out; nothing else I could do. I felt "trapped."

I'd spent eight years in University. I didn't want to do another degree. I had debts to repay. I told myself, "I'm doomed, stuck in a classroom forever." Thinking such thoughts terrified me. They led to conclusions such as, "This is all there is to life. I can't stand it."

I was scared all the time. I suffered paralyzing panic attacks. "The Terror," as I called the fear so sharp and painful it debilitated me, struck day and night. I felt helpless, hopeless.

Although doctor-prescribed valium and Dutch beer took the edge off The Terror, they clouded my thinking. I felt overwhelmed. I slid into despair. A number of times, I almost opted for the ultimate solution—the only way out. Or so I thought.

Mostly moderated by the drugs, my perambulating nervous breakdown came and went.

When I worked on projects that had meaning to me, I was fine. While I taught skiing at night, I didn't need the valium. Driving home, thinking about the next day, the pain returned. Sometimes The Terror descended on me like an enraged raptor. I struggled to keep sane. Anxiety and depression came close to crippling me.

I quit teaching. After a frustrating six months in a Master's program in Environmental Design, I joined an educational think tank that focused on generic skills. Things improved.

After designing and running successful programs that combined generic skills with experience-based environmental education, I was recruited by a West Coast university to help start a "Centre For The Study Of The Person."

When I reported for work in Vancouver, there was no centre.

The profs had fought and cancelled the project.

They gave me a job teaching and supervising practice teachers. Back in the classroom, the old thoughts resurfaced. The deep sadness and terror returned.

As my panic rose, I searched for a physician to renew my Valium prescription.

I stumbled upon Joe, an ex-college roommate who was a psychiatrist. Joe practiced Cognitive Behavioural Therapy as part of a pioneering wellness approach. Very quickly, he helped me see that I had self-created most of my problems and negative emotions.

He showed me how, by judging reality, exaggerating my self-talk and blaming others, my situation, and life itself for my "problems," I thought and talked myself into distress. He showed me how, by focusing on negative thoughts, I created The Terror.

I realized that if I could create distress, I could create positive, productive thoughts. I could change my stories, feelings and actions. I dove into the new approach.

Initial results were great. Most of my worst symptoms dissolved within weeks. However, when I stopped practicing my new skills, my symptoms came back.

Chagrined, and fearful of re-experiencing The Terror, I embarked on what became a life-long practice of the **ABCs** and other emotional mastery skills I'll describe later.

Slowly, I soothed my anxiety and dug myself out of depression. Later, as I mastered creating, I became able to embrace and transcend almost any challenging circumstances.

After struggling through many dark and frightening winters I, too, found within myself what I hoped was an invincible summer.

### **Stuck In Problem-Solving**

Back in the middle of my struggle, before Joe, and before I learned to create, I acted like Andre and Sally. I treated my troubles as problems, and tried desperately to solve them.

Nothing seemed to work, at least not for long. No matter what I did, the anxiety and depression were never far away. The Terror could strike at any moment.

So, before I share the techniques that enabled me to manage my thoughts and emotions, I want to show you why problem-solving is shaky framework on which to create results.

I also want to show you how you self-create most your emotional distress by trying to produce complex results with a limited problem-solving approach.

Grasping these dynamics will make it easier for you to embrace the emotional mastery skills and creating approach—and successfully meet the challenge of adversity.

## CHAPTER 3

# The Problem(s) With Problem Solving

*"The problem is not that there are problems.  
The problem is expecting otherwise  
and thinking that having problems is a problem."*

**Theodore Rubin, Psychiatrist & Author**

Does your mind ever spin with images of problems you “must” solve? Does a demanding inner voice of judgement threaten you with dire consequences if you don’t—now?

"Yes," say my stuck clients. "A lot."

Too many, though, define worrying—and the bad feelings it produces—as another problem. So, fighting fire with fire, they conjure up frightening scenarios of what could happen if they don't solve their problems. Then, they react to their scary stories:

"If I can't find a new career path, I'll go crazy worrying about it."

"If I can't lose 20 pounds by the reunion, I'll be so embarrassed."

"What if my business fails? That'd be IT for me. I'd be done. I couldn't stand it."

"If I don't get my sales numbers up, right away, I'll be laid off. In this economy, the chances of getting a good job are nil. I could end up unemployed. Or homeless."

Fear-based adrenaline or anger can get you moving—but only temporarily, and usually in a negative direction. Scaring yourself into action can prevent you from envisioning and creating results you do want. It also takes extra energy to fight against things. You burn out this way. Or break down.

So, why do so many people rely on problem solving?

Partly because it's all they know. It's what they've been taught. It's a default habit that they've practiced for a long time. There's another reason, too.

### The Illusion of Success

"Problem-solving," says Robert Fritz, "provides an almost automatic way of organizing your focus, actions, time, and thought processes. "(W)hen you have a nice juicy problem to work on, you do not have to think. You can obsess."<sup>13</sup>

With its focus on what you don't like and don't want, problem-solving can prevent you from seeing a bigger picture, and creating real results. It can also give you the illusion that you are doing something important and necessary.

Remember the WW2 pilot? The one who radioed in from over the Pacific to say, "I'm lost, but I'm making good time." How can you make good time when you don't know where you are? You can't. It's an illusion, but it feels good.

A miner was deeply depressed by a mine closure—until his union decided to fight it. His wife told an interviewer, "He and the union don't have a hope in hell. I don't care if he's right, or if this works or not. At least for now he feels like a man."

Feeling you're making progress toward what matters is not the best way to judge your progress. Many get trapped in problem-solving's illusory feelings.

There's an old saying, "To a person with a hammer, everything looks like a nail."

Similarly, if you rely on problem-solving as your only skill-set, you'll frame most difficulties as problems. Then you'll flail away at them with your problem-solving hammer, secure in the illusion that you're making good time.

Reacting to circumstances, however, the power is not in your hands. It's in the circumstances. So, relying on problem solving, you can eventually feel powerless—a victim of circumstances.

Still, problem-solving tempts us; it feels good—and sometimes it works.

### Convergent Problems; Divergent Challenges

Philosopher E.F. Schumacher describes two kinds of challenges we call "problems."<sup>14</sup>

**Convergent** problems are solvable. The more you focus on them, the more your answers will converge around a solution.



If you ask twenty experts how to fix a broken leg or faulty TV, all will give you the same or a similar answer. Convergent problems can be solved.

However, if you ask twenty experts, “What’s the best way to raise kids, create a fit, healthy lifestyle, or craft a thriving life or career?” you’re likely to get twenty different answers.

Such challenges are divergent. The more you pursue solutions to them, the more those solutions are likely to diverge from each other.



Divergent challenges are not problems. They can’t be “solved.”<sup>15</sup> Trying to find a solution to diverging challenges can push the answers apart from each other until you end up with pairs of conflicting opposites: dilemmas such as “Freedom vs. Discipline,” “Life vs. Work,” “Simplicity vs. Success.”

Our logical minds don’t like these pairs of opposites. We try to simplify them by coming down on one side. When we do, the other cries out for resolution. Action oscillates between the two opposites.

Trying to “balance” divergent poles such as “life vs. work” or “family vs. career” also doesn’t work. It too leads to oscillation (moving back and forth) or compromise (stuck in the middle). Either way, we fail to create real, lasting results.

Most of the difficulties my clients face are divergent challenges, not problems.

### **When Intensity Drives The Action**

Most problems are driven not by an authentic desire for results. They’re driven by intensity—the bad feelings associated with the problem.

When intensity drives the action, your focus becomes relief, not results. You take action to get rid of (or relief from) the intensity of those bad feelings.

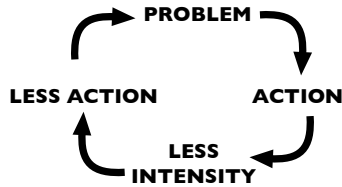
If you apply convergent solutions to divergent challenges, not only will you fail to create lasting results, you’ll probably make things worse.

Take, for example, “solving” a headache caused by work stress.

A painkiller relieves intensity, i.e. pain. It does not eliminate the stress that caused it. Nor does it help you organize your work so it is relaxed, easy, effective and headache-free.

Instead, by relieving intensity, the pill enables you to keep doing what caused the pain—for a while. When it wears off, you are back where you started, maybe more stressed and a little closer to ulcers.

When action relieves intensity, there is less drive to keep acting. The problem remains—"managed" for now yet unsolved. When intensity builds again, the problem resurfaces. The pattern repeats in a circular, oscillating fashion.



Using cigarettes, alcohol, and other drugs—even food—to reduce the intensity of problems follows the same pattern. It, too, often makes things worse.

Even well-intended, employee stress-management programs can work like this. Although they provide temporary relief from stress, such programs sometimes turn burnout into breakdown. By increasing your ability to "cope," they enable you to take on more and more stress—until you cannot take any more, and break down.

Not everyone breaks down. Many give up. Stuck, tired of oscillating, and feeling helpless, they slip into a downward spiral toward hopelessness, despair or worse.

### **Focusing On Problems Depresses People**

Ronald Lippitt coined the term "group dynamics" back in the 1940's.

Initially, reports Marvin Weisbord,<sup>16</sup> "[Lippitt] was "appalled to hear people in his groups using words like "hopeless," "frustrating," "impotent" as they applied his methods to organizational planning."

Lippitt quickly realized the group's focus was seeking relief from anxiety, not producing real results. Worse, the relief they sought was in part from the pain (intensity) caused by listing and focusing on problems.

When clients like Andre and Sally focus on problems, they report feeling irritated, upset, frustrated, angry, sad, overwhelmed, helpless, depressed, anxious.

When they learn to shift their focus to things they'd love to have in their life, they feel up, hopeful, excited, happy, enthusiastic, jazzed, stoked, energized.

Lippitt saw a similar shift when he focused his groups on "images of potential."

Clear, compelling visions of preferred futures, he found, were vastly more motivating than problems. When people planned actions by working back from a vision of what they truly wanted, they generated high levels of energy, enthusiasm and optimism. They committed to the challenge.



In shifting their focus to desired futures, they shifted from problem-solving to the more powerful creating stance. Jazz great Duke Ellington captured the essence of this shift when he said, "I took the energy it takes to pout and wrote blues tunes with it."

The Duke's soulful tunes were not solutions to problems. They were expressions of his spirit, acts of creation performed in spite of problems he faced and pain he felt. Ellington acknowledged his problems and embraced their energy. Then he transcended them by creating songs of great power and reach.

### **The End Of Problem-Solving**

To succeed in challenging times, we need better tools than problem-solving hammers.

"We need to question whether problem solving has already fixed that which is solvable," says Appreciative Inquiry expert Sherene Zolno, "and begin to focus on what is yet possible—the untapped potential beyond fixing what's already in place."<sup>17</sup>

We have reached the end of problem-solving. The time has come to do as The Duke did—shift from problem-solving to creating as our primary way of producing results.

### **The Urge to Create**

"Understanding that the future isn't something that happens to you but something you create," says physician and clinical psychologist Joan Borysenko, "is the key to surviving and thriving in changing times."<sup>18</sup>

If you don't create the future you want, you'll have to deal with the future you get.

If you'd rather not deal with just any future, increase your creating skills. Learn how to embrace and deal with divergent challenges, and create what matters.

Carl Jung recognized the wisdom in making this shift when he said that life's most important problems are not solved, only outgrown. They fade when confronted with a new and stronger life urge. Perhaps the most powerful life urge is the urge to create.

Creating is driven by desire—love. It is rooted in the truth of current reality. It expresses our spirit through playful yet focused action. It is the place where our head, heart and hands all come together.

Creating embraces the tension of opposites. Its structure is based on a hierarchy in which vision drives the action—important values guide the expression of lesser values. Creating draws on creative tension to transcend conflict and produce desired results.

When we engage the urge to create by acting within the creating structure, most of what we call problems tend to fade or dissolve.

## The Structure of Creating

The act of creating comprises a set of skills and a form or framework—a structure—within which to organize and connect those skills so they consistently lead to the results you most want to bring into being.

Structure refers to arrangement—to how we put the pieces and parts of a system together. Just as a heap of bicycle parts is not a bicycle until the parts are connected properly, the structure of our lives depends on how we arrange our values, aspirations, desires, beliefs, fears, and reality itself.

Why? In any structure, energy and action follow a path of least resistance.

Water flows along the path of a streambed. Electricity follows the path set up by the wiring in your home or office. Our actions are influenced by the structures underlying our lives. **To change our actions and results, we must first change our structures.**

We saw above that structures with oscillating paths do not lead to lasting results. To create lasting results, we must embed our actions in a structure in which the path of least resistance flows from where we are to where we most want to be.

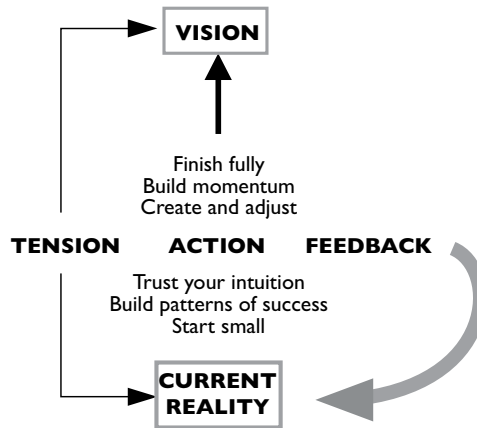
Creating has such a structure. Driven by vision, grounded in reality, and energized by creative tension, it focuses action so it consistently supports results.

The structure of creating comprises seven skills, each of which is critical to the overall form and function of the creating approach:

1. **Craft clear, compelling visions of desired results.** Get clear about and commit to your destination, to a vision of what you most want to create;
2. **Assess current reality accurately, objectively and in an emotionally neutral way.** Get clear about where you are, and what you have to work with;
3. **Hold vision and current reality in creative tension.** Use the gap between vision and reality as a possibility space. Use the energy that emerges to guide actions;
4. **Decide what your next steps are.** Then take actions that consistently move you from where you are to where you want to be;
5. **Learn from mistakes.** Failure is merely feedback. Adjust, and take new steps;
6. **Build momentum that leads toward your desired result.** Be open to surprise, novelty, and invention. Experiment. Learn from experience. Create and adjust;
7. **Finish fully.** Celebrate! Use the energy of completion to start on your next creation.

Creating's structure is robust enough to embrace oscillating structures as part of current reality. It enables us to transcend such structures by including them in our assessment of where we are and what we have to work with.

## THE FRAMEWORK OF CREATING



Actions in the creating framework flow along a path of least resistance between current reality and envisioned results.

The path is not necessarily straight. It is often crooked and winding. It spirals up toward results. Working within this framework, it is easier to express conflicting values without significantly detracting from either.

Action in the creating structure honours both vision and current reality. Using this framework consistently increases your odds of moving toward desired results.

However, if you do not also develop emotional mastery, creating is a much bigger challenge. Without emotional mastery, it is hard to be clear about what you truly want. It is difficult to ground vision in objective reality. It is almost impossible to set up a solid platform and framework for action. It is difficult to be resilient in the face of adversity.

With emotional mastery, it is easier to clarify and create results, which increases your emotional mastery. The two skill sets reinforce each other, leading to a positive, upward cycle of learning, mastery and success.

It's to those emotional mastery skills that we turn to now. We'll start Part 2 by exploring and developing a realistically optimistic explanatory style.

# PART 2

## WHAT?

*"Resilience is a reflex, a way of facing and understanding the world,  
that is deeply etched into a person's mind and soul.  
Resilient people and companies face reality with staunchness,  
make meaning of hardship instead of crying out in despair,  
and improvise solutions from thin air. Others do not."*

— Diane Coudu, Sr. Editor  
Harvard Business Review

## CHAPTER 4

## EXPLANATORY STYLE

*"Nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so."*

— Shakespeare

Your explanatory style—what you think and say to yourself; how you explain events, circumstances and adversity—is key to whether you deal resiliently with difficulties, or get done in by them.

The Buddha understood the connection between thoughts and emotions. "We are what we think," he said. "All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world." Our thoughts precede and give rise to our emotions.

In his Autobiography, Mark Twain put it even more powerfully.

"Life," he wrote, "does not consist mainly—or even largely—of facts and happenings. It consists mainly of the storm of thoughts that is forever blowing through one's head."

### **Change Your Story; Change Your Results**

That storm of thoughts blowing through our heads is "self-talk."

We talk to ourselves all the time, chattering away about what happens to us, what we think about it and what we "coulda, woulda, shoulda" done or do about it.

Resilience expert Karen Reivich calls these "ticker-tape beliefs."

They are, Reivich says, "the thoughts that run through your mind—sometimes outside your awareness—that determine how you feel and what you decide to do in the midst of an adversity, challenge, or new experience."<sup>19</sup>

As our inner [ticker-tape](#) chatters on, we can easily miss emotionally upsetting trigger words such as "should, must, can't, won't, don't, all, none, never, every, totally, nothing, every-

one, always...". Such words trigger negative emotions because they judge rather than describe reality, making it out to be absolute.

Self-talk is a critical sub-skill of your explanatory style. It's part of the story you tell yourself. How you deal with your self-talk can make a huge difference in how you explain reality to yourself, and to the results you can or cannot create.

Self talk can act like an inner coach. It can encourage you, believe in you, pump up your confidence and push you to create what matters. "Good job, buddy. You almost got it that time. Try it again."

Or self-talk can sound like an inner critic—a Voice of Judgement. It can slam you, beat you up when make a mistake and undermine your confidence and desire. "You loser. You missed it again. You might as well pack it in."

Andre's self-talk was largely critical. When I asked him about the voice in his head, he said it sounded like his father's.

Sally's voice of judgement was mostly her own, but it, too, was critical of things, others and herself. Later, she realized that she sometimes feared she was becoming like her mother who had a very critical explanatory style.

This is natural. Self-talk and explanatory style are picked up in our formative years, predominantly from our primary caregiver.<sup>20</sup>

Andre's family was strongly patriarchal. In his upbringing, his father was primary. Sally's mother was her main caregiver. My primary caregiver was my mother. She saw herself as a victim. I have the same tendency and have to be vigilant about my self-talk.

Explanatory style can make the difference between a pessimistic, problem-focused approach to life or a realistic, optimistic creating stance. It can make the difference between focusing on what you don't like and don't want, or focusing on what you truly do want—and creating it.

As you take on challenges, climb your life's mountains and create what matters, your explanatory style can make the difference between quitting (giving up), camping (compromising) or climbing (persevering, practicing, learning, getting stronger and making good progress), in spite of the difficulties you face.<sup>21</sup>

How you explain adversity can even make the difference between merely feeling pain—physically and emotionally—and suffering deeply.

### **Pain Is Inevitable; Suffering Is Optional**

"Pain is inevitable," said Buddha. "Suffering is optional."

What's the difference?

Imagine two scenarios. In the first, you're walking on a sidewalk. A skateboarder careens around a corner, slamming you into the gutter. You feel your ankle snap. Nausea sweeps over you. At the hospital, the doctor tells you that your break requires surgery. You'll be out of commission for several months, or more.

In the second scenario, imagine that you're a runner on third base in the last inning of your slo-pitch baseball championship. The batter hits a single into right field. In a race with the fielder's throw, you slide into home plate just ahead of the throw.

"Safe!" shouts the umpire. Your run wins the game—and the championship.

But, as your foot hits the raised edge of home plate, you feel your ankle snap. Nausea sweeps over you. At the hospital, the doctor tells you that your break requires surgery. You'll be out of commission for several months, or more.

### **Pain Happens; Suffering Is Created**

Researchers who study pain and suffering say that you will feel more pain—and suffer more—from an ankle broken by an out-of-control skateboarder than by one broken in the act of winning a championship game.

Suffering, it seems, is physical pain compounded by emotional pain. It is further compounded by second-order emotional pain—feeling bad about feeling bad.

In the skateboard incident, you suffer because you judge the break and the pain to be "unfair." Instead of accepting reality—i.e. saying to yourself, "It was random; it could have happened to anyone"—you fight it. You argue with reality.

"This is unfair," you complain. "It should not have happened. That boarder should not have been on the sidewalk." "Why me? I don't deserve this."

Fighting reality not only intensifies pain; it also causes you to feel bad about the "unfairness" of the pain. Layering emotional pain over physical pain intensifies both. You suffer.

In the slo-pitch scenario, you suffer less (or not at all). Why?

Because you explain it differently. You tell yourself a different story than in the skateboard scenario.

Although your ankle hurts, you feel good about winning the championship. You tell yourself a hero story, not a victim story. You don't waste energy wondering, "Why me?" Feeling good about your accomplishment, you accept the pain, which lessens its intensity. "It's just pain," you say. "It'll pass."

You feel physical pain, but don't feel emotionally pained about it. You accept it as the cost of winning. So, you don't suffer. You accept reality, and move on.

### **Suffering From A Failed Relationship**

It's not only in sports that this distinction between pain and suffering holds true.

Judging a failed relationship as "unfair" could cause you to suffer for months, or years. The unfairness is not reality. Even though it might feel real, it's a judgement; it's something you made up, an opinion you hold about reality.

Instead, you could say, "Yes, this happened. I don't like it. I'm not happy. But I don't have to make myself miserable by ruminating about "unfairness" or "Why me?" Sure, it hurts, but the pain will pass. Now what?"

Such a realistic yet optimistic stance enables you to accept pain and avoid suffering. The pain passes more quickly, enabling you to resume normal life more quickly.

### **Feel Your Grief; Let Go of Suffering**

I coached a woman who had suffered from the death of her child for over ten years. Holding tightly to her grief, and fearing that letting go of it would disrespect her lost son, her suffering intensified from year to year.

It caused the end of one relationship, and was about to do in another. Desperately unhappy, my client feared she'd never be happy again. She had considered suicide.

As part of helping her accept, embrace and transcend reality, I had her imagine she could hold her grief in her hand. She saw that she could gently yet securely hold her sadness, without gripping it so hard that she squeezed all the happiness out of her life.

She realized she could hold her sorrow, and still have energy for life.

After doing the exercise, she felt better. With more practice and work with the **ABCs**, she felt better yet. Over time, she learned to gently hold her sadness as a natural part of her life. She realized that she could feel sad without suffering.

Slowly, her relationship improved. Eventually, she felt ready to remarry.

### **Explanatory Style And Realistic Optimism**

A realistic yet optimistic explanatory style is key to creating successful results.

"Seligman and others," wrote Paul Stoltz, "have shown that explanatory or attributional style—how you respond to adversity—is a strong predictor for success in many arenas."<sup>22</sup>

Insurance agents with optimistic explanatory styles sell more policies and stick with the job longer than pessimists. Even a group of "rejects"—agents who did not fit the traditional salesperson profile, yet responded well to adversity—became top sellers.



Other studies show that realistically optimistic managers outperform pessimistic managers. It's the same with students, army cadets, senior citizens and optimistic leaders. All outperform those with pessimistic explanatory styles. "And," adds Stoltz, "those who responded optimistically to adversity outlived those who responded pessimistically."

It pays to cultivate a realistically optimistic explanatory style. To create outstanding results, it helps that your assessments of reality are accurate, realistic and optimistic.

### Explaining Adversity

When you encounter difficult or adverse situations or circumstances, be they small daily hassles or momentous defeats, your way of explaining what happens determines how help-less-feeling you become, or how optimistic, energized and active you become.

If your explanatory style is pessimistic, you will likely explain the adversity as if it were permanent, pervasive and personal<sup>23</sup>:

- **Permanent:** ("This is gonna last forever.")
- **Pervasive:** ("This will affect all of my life and work.")
- **Personal:** ("This is all my fault.")

If you describe adversity this way, you tell yourself a pessimistic story in which adversity is stable (unchanging), internal (your fault) and general (applies to everything). Andre told himself this kind of story. Me, too. My story about being trapped made me feel "doomed."

Sally's story was similar, except she blamed others, or her situation. Later, she realized this was a protective strategy, covering up fear that she was really to blame for her troubles.

If you tell this kind of permanent, pervasive and personal story, you will feel anxious, help-less and depressed. Your energy will fade. You will take less action, or no action. Your results will suffer. You will feel bad (and feel bad about feeling bad.)

However, if your explanatory style is realistically optimistic, you're likely to see adversity as temporary, specific and external:

- **Temporary:** ("This won't last long.")
- **Specific:** ("Just a part of my life is affected.")
- **External:** ("It's not all my fault.")

You'll realize that you have some control—if only over your thoughts and stories about adversity. You will tell realistically optimistic stories about your ability to handle it.

By doing so, you will limit adversity's reach into other areas of your life. You will accept reality without blaming yourself (or others) for it. Moreover, you will realize the adversity won't endure forever. This too, you'll think, will pass.

When adversity strikes, even those with a realistically optimistic explanatory style feel some negativity, such as a temporary feeling of helplessness. But it passes. Reality-grounded, optimistic thinking energizes you for action. You are able to focus on results you want, and move ahead. Be careful, though.

### **Don't Get Too Optimistic**

Being realistically optimistic doesn't mean becoming a naïve Pollyanna with excessive optimism. If you describe reality as too positive, you run the risk of thinking unrealistically.

A 3:1 positivity ratio is good. 6:1 is better. But, above 10:1, your thinking can become unrealistic and dangerous. You can become excessively optimistic, and so out of touch with reality-as-it-is, that it can blindside you.<sup>24</sup>

Darlene wanted to take my workshop. She didn't have money for the deposit, so I told her I'd hold a space for her for a week. Without a deposit, I couldn't confirm it for longer.

"No problem," she said. "I have no trouble with money. I visualize it, and it manifests."

"Hmm?" I thought. "Why not manifest it now and secure a space?" But I held my tongue.

When Darlene couldn't come up with the money on the appointed day, it turned out she was overdrawn at the bank, had stopped paying her house and car payments and had maxed out three credit cards. When she went to the bank for what she called a "bridging" loan, the manager refused her, and told her she needed psychological help, not financial.

The magical, too-optimistic thinking that made her feel good was unrealistic, and unworkable. She failed to manifest the money. Her car was repossessed. The bank took her house. She even lost her teenage daughters, who, embarrassed because their mother had to apply for social assistance, went to live with their father.

### **A Fourth Basic: Owning Your Results**

Paul Stoltz, who studied with Martin Seligman, describes the three basics that make up your explanatory style as **Control**, **Reach** and **Endurance**.

Control relates to the personal/external nature of your explanation. Reach describes how pervasive/specific you think the adversity is; how much you let it bleed into other areas of your life. Endurance relates to the permanent/temporary aspect of your explanation; how long you think an adversity will last.

To round out what he calls the **CORE** skills for dealing with adversity, Stolz added a fourth basic: **Ownership**. A willingness to own the outcomes of adversity—to take responsibility for

the results you want—in spite of what happens and regardless of who is to blame for it—helps you persevere, persist, and create those results.

People who score high on ownership keep going where others quit. They feel empowered where others feel helpless. They succeed where others fail. They are also more authentically happy than pessimists or Pollyannas.

Owning your desired results increases your sense of control. It helps limit adversity's reach into your life and work. It enables you to endure difficulties. It leads to positive feelings, increased energy, effective actions and successful results.

A pessimistic explanatory style underlies much (maybe most) emotional distress and ineffectiveness. It leads to victim stories, "poor me" self-talk and incomplete results.

The good news is if you're stuck in a pessimistic explanatory style, you don't have to stay stuck. Using tools such as the **ABCs** and **CORE** skills, you can teach yourself a positive yet realistic explanatory style. Doing so increases your odds of being successful.

### **How Owning My Results Helped Me Thrive In The Face of Adversity**

Although I've always been a doer, my "doing" wasn't usually easy, pleasant or fully effective. Growing up with a pessimistic explanatory style, I tended to see the worst in situations, others and myself. My judgements about adversity made it difficult for me to create results.

I often had to force (or scare) myself into action. I felt as if I was climbing a mountain with 70 pounds of rocks in my pack. I put out great effort, but rarely achieved the level of results I desired. I was often disappointed and dispirited. Moreover, when something didn't go as I thought it should go, I was easily frustrated. I'd get angry and quit.

With help from coaches, self-study and a great deal of practice, I learned to embrace adversity, own my results and take action on what I could control. Results started to come more easily and enjoyably. Eventually, I got good enough to teach others.

Once, for example, I was set to give a 90-minute "Creating Resilience" keynote to 1000 people at a prestigious, international conference in the Canadian Rockies. Three difficulties threatened to derail my 10:30 to noon presentation.

First, the agenda drifted off schedule. Because this had happened the previous two days, and people were late for lunch, the cooks decided to lock the dining room at 12:15, sharp. So, as the program drifted further off schedule, the organizers asked me to shorten my talk: first to 60 minutes, then to 45, and finally to 35.

I agreed, but with each change, I grew edgier.

Still, I told myself, "This is reality. I can't change it. But I can adjust." Sitting in the green room, I hastily revised my notes, and re-sorted my presentation graphics.

When I walked on stage, my podium—mic attached—was bolted to the right-hand edge of the stage. My projector sat in the middle, 25 feet away. To talk and show transparencies (letter-sized, floppy slides), I had to unfasten the mic, untape its cord from the floor, and drag it to centre stage. There, I held the mic and notes in one hand, and changed slides with the other. Not only did this frustrate me, it cut time off my talk.

Then, when I started to speak, there was no sound. I looked up at the booth and raised my arms, palms up and mouthed, "What?" The techs gave me a thumbs-up and mouthed, "You're live. Go."

I spoke closer to the mic, and louder. The audience shook their heads, "No."

Each time I looked to the booth, they gave me a frustrated thumbs-up sign.

Finally, I left the stage and started up to talk to the techs. One met me halfway. He leaned in close and whispered loudly, "You're live, asshole. You have been the whole time." Then, shaking his head like I was an idiot, he ran back to the booth.

I returned to the stage, shaken, confused, and angry. My 90-minute session had shrunk to under 30 minutes. I had no sound. I felt like saying, "What's the point?" and stomping off the stage in frustration and anger.

Instead, I told myself, "This is difficult but not impossible. It doesn't have to wreck my talk. I don't have to get angry. And, besides, it'll soon be over."

I took ownership of the results I wanted: a professional approach, a strong talk, an impressed audience, happy organizers, a reputation for being resilient—and my \$1500 speaker's fee. I sucked it up and shouted my 25-minute talk.

When the organizers announced lunch, I offered to stay and take questions. Nearly half the audience crowded into the front rows and the space in front of the stage. We had a great 45-minute Q & A session. In the end, the audience was happy. I got excellent ratings for my talk. The organizers were delighted. And I got paid.

Moreover, the techs apologized, explaining that although the feed from the mic to their booth was live, a TV crew had unplugged the feed from the mic to the auditorium.

Over the next few days, I got a myriad of compliments on how well I handled the adversity and practiced what I preached. I received dozens of requests for coaching help. And I was offered two more high-paying speaking gigs.

### **Winner or Victim?**

Experience is not just what happens to you. Experience includes what you do with what happens to you. Self-talk—what you think and say about what happens—is critical.

The story you tell yourself, like the slo-pitch hero, can lead to realistic optimism, energy and desired results—a winner's story. Or, like the pedestrian's, it can be a victim's story.

Victim stories lead to pessimism, helplessness and hopelessness. They prevent you from creating the results you want. Take sports, for example.

Working with elite NCAA Division 1 swimmers, Paul Stoltz came up with remarkable results. Swimmers swam their best for 50 metres but had 1.2 seconds added to their times. When asked to repeat the swim, those with pessimistic explanatory styles swam slower. When tricked the same way, swimmers with optimistic styles swam faster.

By examining press statements of athletes, Martin Seligman found that this season's explanatory style predicted athletes' win/loss records for next year.<sup>25</sup>

Seligman also predicts that, if everything else is equal, optimistic athletes will win because they will try harder. They will embrace pressure as a privilege, access its energy and use it to create results. He also found that explanatory style is most important after a loss, an injury or in tight competition situations.

Research by Stoltz, Seligman and others shows that the same relationships hold for professionals, people in businesses and organizations and ordinary folks like us. Those with optimistic styles consistently out-perform those with pessimistic styles.

As we came to understand how our explanatory styles affected our thoughts, emotions, actions and results, Andre, Sally and I also learned to create new, more supportive habits.

Primarily through regular practice of the **ABC's**, we became better able to deal with whatever life threw at us.

## CHAPTER 5

# THE ABCs—PART 1:

## YOUR BELIEFS CAN CAUSE MISERY—OR JOY

*(People) are disturbed not by things,  
but by the view that they take of them.*

– Epictetus, Greek Philosopher

Developing emotional mastery—accepting reality-as-it-is, managing self-talk, changing explanatory style, taking control and owning results—sounds good. If you're like my clients, you'll ask, "How do I do it? How can I learn it? Where do I start? Can I even learn it?"

Yes, if you want to, you can learn it. It's relatively easy to get the basics down.

My psychiatrist friend, Joe, taught me the **ABCs** technique.<sup>26</sup> Pioneered by Albert Ellis, it is a simple, yet powerful technique for noticing, challenging, and changing self-defeating thoughts, beliefs and stories to self-supporting ones.

Within a week of learning the **ABCs** most of my symptoms of anxiety and depression dissolved. When I told him, Joe told me not to get cocky.

"Mastering this stuff takes time," he said. "You're building new habits. Eventually, they will replace your old, dysfunctional habits. You've been practicing those habits for years, even decades. They're strong. Keep that in mind, and keep practicing."

He was right. Unless I practiced the **ABCs** and other emotional mastery skills regularly, I slid back into old habits—especially when things got tough, or when I suffered setbacks.

However, regular, deliberate practice of the **ABCs** enabled me to pull myself out of deep despair and potentially life-ending anxiety, and, in time, to stay out.

I did hundreds of **ABCs**, teaching myself to describe reality accurately and objectively. Doing so enhanced my creating skills, increasing my sense of well-being. Gradually I shifted from a negative, self-defeating explanatory style to a realistic, positive and optimistic one.

As I did, my relationships improved. My work improved. My health and fitness improved.

Regular practice kept The Terror at bay. Although I still experience normal emotional ups and downs, I haven't experienced intense anxiety or deep depression in over thirty years. Doing the **ABCs** and changing my stories truly changed the quality of my life.

### How Your Beliefs Cause You Misery—Or Joy

"Insight is the first step of change, says Karen Reviech, "but it is not sufficient." To change your stories, she says, you've got to learn and practice your **ABCs**.

In the **ABCs** model:

**A** stands for **Adversity** (or Activating Event, the thing that upsets you),

**B** stands for **Beliefs** (what you say and think about A), and

**C** stands for **Consequences** (your feelings and actions).

Many of us don't understand this process. We try to simplify it, with dire results.

One of Andre's "problems," for example, involved an important report he was doing for his supervising partner. This boss was demanding about accuracy. Andre had already run afoul of him once for handing in inaccurate work. He wanted to avoid the kind of humiliating public criticism he'd received as a result of this mistake.

Drafting the report took more time than he thought it would. Running behind, Andre rushed to print the draft so he could check and revise it before handing it in, confident his report contained the accuracy demanded by the partner.

In his hurry, Andre entered the wrong instructions into his computer and it crashed. He got so upset that he was unable to think clearly enough to restart the printing process.

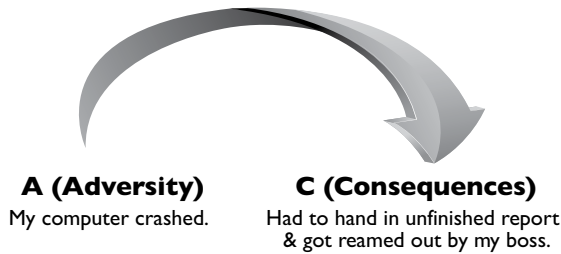
Frantic and frustrated, he gave up. Frightened of delivering the report himself and experiencing the wrath of his boss, he emailed the draft to a secretary and asked her to print and deliver it to the partner. Of course, this strategy didn't work.

"My boss reamed me out in front of the whole office," Andre said. "I was so humiliated I almost quit my job. I was so angry at that computer!"

### The Faulty A-C Connection

Without a clear understanding of the **ABC** process, Andre thought and acted as if **A – the computer crash** caused **C – a poorly prepared report and his boss's wrath**).

Habitually, many of us think **Adversity** directly causes **Consequences** (frustration, anger, anxiety, depression, and despair, and the ineffective actions they give rise to).



Andre's **A-C** thinking was incomplete. **As** do not cause **Cs**.

A crashed computer does not cause frustration or anger or make you hand in an inaccurate report. By your own thinking, you create those emotions and actions.

Andre's faulty **A-C** connection distorted the fact that his **Bs**—thoughts, beliefs and stories about **A**—gave rise to his **Cs**.

Remember the broken ankle example? Recall how different stories and thoughts about the injury—different **Bs**—led to different emotions and outcomes?

A faulty **A-C** explanation leads to self-defeating emotions, such as Andre's frustration. Such emotions lead to self-defeating actions and results, such as his incomplete report, and in part, to his partner's anger.

### **A Self-Supporting ABC Connection**

When adversity strikes, you first filter **A**: what happens, through **B**: what you think and believe about what happened. You interpret—try to make sense of, and explain—**A**.

Interpretation at **B** can occur in a millisecond. You're usually not aware you're doing it.

Here's what Andre was really thinking. It is the **ABCs**, though not yet self-supporting.

<b>A (Adversity) →</b>	<b>Beliefs (B) →</b>	<b>C (Consequences)</b>
Computer crashed.	I'm an idiot. A screw-up. I'll never get this right.	Frustrated; give up; reamed out by my boss.

Changing the **Bs** changes the story—the explanation—and the **Cs**, the feelings, emotions, actions and results. What if Andre had known about the **Bs** in the **ABCs**?



**A (Adversity) →**

Computer crashed.

**Beliefs (B) →**Just a glitch,  
slow down, try again**C (Consequences)**Calmly print and edit report;  
praised by my boss.

Different? More rational, objective **Bs** lead to more rational, effective **Cs**.

Here's an example of how I made such a shift in my own thinking, emotions and actions.

**Change My Story; Change My Experience**

One Christmas, I moved to an island cottage. It sat in a quiet, tree-shaded, mostly rural setting in which I hoped to practice simplicity, and develop my writing chops.

In late February, that all changed.

At about 9:30 each morning, a raucous throng of 50 or more crows invaded the cedar trees behind my house. The birds' incessant cawing sounded more like the drone of monster bees than a mere flock of birds. It infuriated me.

Afraid of losing precious writing time I told myself, "This isn't fair. I can't work in these conditions. It has to stop." I bolted out my back door bellowing, "I can't stand this. Go away, you stupid birds." Furious, I grabbed sticks and rocks and flung them at the crows. That only excited the flock to louder cawing.

I wasted 20 minutes, nearly threw out my shoulder and pumped my heart rate to dangerous levels. Eventually, by pounding on the trees with a log, I persuaded the rabble to move across the street. I went inside and tried to settle down enough to write.

Fifteen minutes later the jabbering jackdaws were back. Out the door I shot.

This happened several times a day. I hated those crows. They were driving me nuts. They were ruining my writing. I wanted to murder them.

[Can you see my faulty **A-C** connection? **A**: Noisy crows → **C**: Driving me nuts. No awareness of the faulty **Bs**—"this isn't fair, it's ruining my work"—with which I self-created my distress.]

After a week, desperate for help, I told a bird expert about my crow "problem."

"Relax," she said. "It's fledging time. The little ones are just out of the nest. They can't fly. So the flock gathers to protect them. As soon as they fly on their own, the flock will disperse. It'll only be a week or so."

That quick, I had new story. I had new thoughts and beliefs; new **Bs**.

"Oh," I said, mentally changing my **Bs**, "that's great."

My new story objectively explained what was happening. Emotionally neutral, it made it easy for me to accept reality as it was: Things change; things don't always go as I want them to. I don't have to get upset about it. The crows will move on.

I stopped taking the crow's antics personally. They were not trying to disturb me. They were protecting their young. The noise wouldn't last forever, just a week or so.

As I changed my **Bs**, I relaxed. I started to enjoy the flock's presence. I told myself I was providing sanctuary for the fledges. (So noble.)

Now, when I hear the raucous pre-fledge chatter, I take it as a welcome sign of spring. I look forward to providing sanctuary for the flock. I love those crows.

### **It's Not Always That Simple**

Changing my crow story was easy. The expert helped me see objective reality—the new **Bs**. Then I was able to spot the subjective (made up) reality I'd fought against.

To make the shift in the face of more difficult adversities, I'd first have to identify my "hot"—self-defeating—**Bs**, and change them to cool, self-supporting **Bs**.

I'd have to find a statement such as, "It's impossible to write with this noise," and change it to something such as, "The noise distracts, but with headphones I write fine."

Notice the change in the emotional charge from the first sentence to the second? Without a tool such as the **ABCs**, making such changes so can be difficult.

When you feel upset it's hard to notice your dysfunctional thoughts and irrational explanations about what's happening. And harder yet to change them to rational, self-supporting thoughts and explanations.

### **Rational vs. Irrational Beliefs**

Key to the **ABCs** is knowing you hold two kinds of thoughts and beliefs in your **Bs**:

**Irrational** (dysfunctional, self-defeating) beliefs, and

**Rational** (functional, self-supporting) beliefs.

In my crow example, my irrational beliefs were, "The crows' racket is terrible. I can't work; they're ruining my writing. What if it never ends? I can't stand it."

None of those beliefs are rational. They are not objective or useful thoughts. They are judgements, exaggerations, and faulty conclusions. Because they don't square with reality as it actually is, they are irrational (against reality). They lead to irrational actions such as frantic rock flinging and out-of-control shrieking.

When I cooled down, and based my explanation on rational, objective thoughts: "It's fledging time, crows flock to protect fledges, they'll be gone in a week or so," my emotions, actions and results changed. I relaxed, enjoyed the crows and wrote in spite of them.

### Three Nutty Beliefs Cause Most Of Our Misery

Summing up seventy years of research into the effects of irrational thinking on emotions, actions and results, Albert Ellis concluded that "three nutty beliefs" underlie and give rise to most of the misery most of us suffer most of the time.<sup>27</sup> They are:

- I **must** do well.
- You **must** treat me well.
- The world **must** be easy (and fair).

You can substitute the words "should," "ought to," "have to," and "need to" for "must." They all have the same self-defeating effect.

Andre suffered from all three of these beliefs. Sally suffered from the second and third. Me? All three.

So you can see why—when teaching wasn't like I thought it should be, and the system and other teachers didn't treat me as I thought they should, and the whole deal was way harder than I thought it should be—I suffered a great deal of misery.

"Shoulding" on myself, others and the world, it's no wonder I felt stuck and doomed.

Nutty beliefs stop us in our tracks because they are absolutes. They lay out inflexible rules—demands. "I should...." "You must...." "They should...." "The world should...."

Also, each of the three beliefs can imply other absolute beliefs. "I must do well," for example, implies "I must always do well—at everything." Thinking this way can spin you up into increasingly nuttier thoughts, such as, "If I don't do well, it'll be awful, terrible, and horrible. I'll be a horrible person. I can't stand it." Even, "I'm outta here."

Such beliefs are irrational. It is impossible to live up to them. Trying to do so pits you against reality. When you fail to live up to such rigid, self-imposed demands, you feel upset and take self-defeating actions—or no action.

### A Truly Nutty Belief

The most severe example of a nutty belief I've dealt with involved a client who tried to buy an expensive new car, but could not make a final decision. He'd been stuck for over a year.

When he finally used the **ABCs** to examine his dilemma, the first nutty belief he surfaced was a whopper: "If I get it wrong, I'll die."

This is an extreme version of the "I must do well" belief. I think it's pretty easy to see why he couldn't decide whether to buy a Volvo station wagon or a 4-wheel drive Audi.

He's not the only client I've worked with who suffered from this irrational belief. Once they became aware of it, and its effect on their emotions, actions and results (or lack thereof), all were able to dispute and change it. Their stress level dropped, their thinking cleared and they were able to take effective action.

My client bought himself the Audi. And loved it.

### **Dispute Your Nutty Beliefs**

The bad news is that most of us habitually suffer from one or more of the three nutty beliefs, and their many variations. The good news is, if you can catch them, you can dispute them, and show yourself that they are irrational.

Then you can substitute rational, self-supporting thoughts and beliefs in their place. You can shift from demands to desires. When you do:

"I must get it right," becomes "I want (or choose) to get it right."

"People shouldn't laugh at me," becomes "I'd prefer it if people didn't laugh at me."

"Decisions should be easier," becomes, "I'd like decisions to be easy."

The car buyer changed "If I get it wrong I'll die" to "If I buy the wrong car, I'll trade it in on the other one. I might lose a bit of money, but I won't die."

When you change your beliefs, you change your feelings and actions. They become more optimistic, positive and effective. Life becomes easier, and more enjoyable.

Don't "should" on yourself, others or the world. Or as Ellis said, "Don't masturbate."

"Cherchez les shoulds," quipped psychologist [Karen Horney](#). She believed that many of her clients were distressed because they spent their lives trying to live up to an image of a perfect self by imposing a series of "shoulds" and "should nots" on themselves.

So find the shoulds; change them to "want," "prefer," or "choose." Change them from demands to desires. You'll feel better, act more effectively and create better results.

Try it. Choose a thought/belief that starts with, "I should..." or "I must..."

Then change it to, "I'd like...", "I want...", or "I'd prefer...."

Notice a difference?

Summing up, it helps to understand that:

**A:** something happens to you, around you, or within you, then,

**B:** you filter what happens through your thoughts and beliefs, and

**C:** generate feelings, actions and results—positive or negative.

Applying this insight is key to making your thinking support you, and your results.

Making it your strong, default habit will make you relaxed, calm, open and able to think and act with clarity and effectiveness. It will make creating results easier and more effective—with much less stress and strain.

Simple as ABC, yes?

Almost. There's a bit more involved in the full process.

## CHAPTER 6

## THE ABCs—PART 2:

*Change Your Story; Change Your Life**"If you don't have solid beliefs, you cannot build a stable life.**Beliefs are like the foundation of a building...**they are the foundation to build your life upon."***– Alfred A. Montapert; Philosopher, Author**

"Bruce, thanks so much for your feedback," began an email from Andre. He'd done the **ABCs** exercise with his printing "screw-up," and I'd sent him feedback.

"It's helping me see past my problems. I think monitoring and changing my self-talk using the **ABCs** is a superb method. I truly feel that if I practice and master it, it could well change my work and my life, and help me achieve the goals I've set."

Andre was a quick study, willing to practice regularly. In almost no time, he made significant changes to his explanatory style. His new, reality-grounded, optimistic thinking provided him a solid foundation for creating results. It energized him. With it, he began to generate more effective action and results.

To get the full benefits of the **ABCs**, you have to dig out your irrational, self-defeating **Bs**, and then swap them for rational, self-supporting thoughts and beliefs. Doing so requires adding **D** and **E** to the **ABCs**.

**The Full ABCDE Process**

Becoming fluent in the **ABCDE** process involves practicing two more steps:

**D: Dispute and Change** self-defeating thoughts/beliefs; and

**E: Energize Yourself.** Use the energy that comes from a realistic yet optimistic story to clarify what you want to create, and to act in support of it.

As mentioned, use **ABC** to identify the relationship between adversity, beliefs and consequences. Identify your dysfunctional thoughts and beliefs. Then use **D** and **E** to dispute and change those beliefs, and energize yourself for action.

Take a look at this excerpt from Andre's full ABCDE exercise.

In it, he applied a "review the game tape" strategy. The adversity **(A)** happened weeks earlier. Still, his nutty, harshly judgemental thoughts **(B)** caused him anxiety **(C)**. So he deliberately identified the offending **Bs**, disputed them, and changed them to more rational, optimistic ones.

**D: Dispute:**

BELIEF	DISPUTE
<p>I really screwed up this time; nobody can ever rely on me for anything. All I ever do is screw up - I'm just really stupid; I have no intelligence at all.</p>	<p>I made a mistake at a time when there was a deadline.</p> <p>I have also made mistakes on previous occasions. The general message coming out of this is to always check my work before submitting for review.</p> <p>This could have been avoided by carefully planning in advance and making sure things were ready at the right time.</p> <p>I'm not stupid, just sometimes careless.</p>
<p>All this hard work I put into university was a waste, there was always something wrong with me. My dad always keeps telling me I have so many deficiencies and he is right.</p>	<p>No, there is something fundamentally right with me. There are so many things I have done well or achieved. The teachers at school always said that one day I would be extremely successful.</p>
<p>The partner looked at me in a rude way – and made fun of me in front of everyone. My career's over now.</p>	<p>The partner was stressed and upset, but not really rude. And he just criticized my work, not me.</p> <p>Afterwards, he seemed his cheery self and didn't mention the situation. He even wished me good luck on my secondment.</p> <p>He is a partner, after all, and probably didn't get to that position by making superficial judgements on people who are under intense pressure.</p>
<p>There's no way I'll ever progress in the firm now.</p>	<p>I have since worked on numerous projects and been sent abroad. Clearly, I am progressing.</p>

Notice how Andre's thoughts shifted from negative, absolute and even catastrophic judgements to calm, realistically positive statements about reality as it was. His feelings shifted in the same way. So did his actions. As the last line implies, he succeeded at numerous projects and was sent abroad to help out at one of the firm's overseas sites.

So, how do you do this? How do you change negative, pessimistic, even nutty thinking into objective thinking that supports you and the results you want to create?

The key lies in disputing and changing your **Bs** so they energize you for action.

### **D: Dispute – Find, Challenge and Change Self-Defeating Bs**

To change negative consequences (bad feelings and self-defeating actions) into positive consequences (good feelings and self-empowering actions) you will need to:

- **Search out your shoulds.**

Start with "the three nutty beliefs." Look for examples of "shoulding" on yourself, others or the world. Look for examples of "musturbating."

Think desires, not demands. Find your "shoulds," and other words such as "must," "ought to," "have to," and "need to." Then change them to "want, prefer, like or choose."

"I should do well," becomes "I want to do well," or better yet, "I choose to do well." "He should return my emails right away" becomes, "I prefer he reply promptly."

- **Dispute your self-defeating thoughts and beliefs.**

Gather evidence that thoughts such as "He's a jerk," or "This situation is impossible," are not valid descriptions of reality. See them for what they are: dysfunctional, self-defeating judgements that distort reality.

Give yourself evidence that the opposite of those nutty thoughts is true.

For example, I worked with a woman who justified not practicing her creating work or the **ABCs** by telling herself (and me), "I am lazy." Then she added, "But I knock myself out for other people."

When I pointed out that one of those statements had to be false, she realized the first one was. True, she often acted lazy when it came to doing things for herself. But, because she knocked herself out for others, it was obvious that "I am lazy" was false.

Grounded in her new, rational description of reality, the woman was able to practice the skills she was learning, and apply them to creating results.



- **Use these four questions to check your thoughts and beliefs for validity.**

When we're in the grip of irrational thoughts, they can feel very real. Although they feel true, they're not. You can lessen their grip on you enough to see what is actually real and true by asking and answering these four questions based on The Work of Byron Katie:<sup>28</sup>

1. Is this belief true?
2. Can you absolutely know that it's true?
3. How do you feel and act when you hold on to it?
4. How might you feel and act if you could let go of it, and substitute more rational optimistic thinking?

Take time to fully explore and answer these questions. Come up with more accurate, rational, optimistic and self-supporting thoughts and beliefs.

- **Find your emotionally "hot" trigger words.**

Trigger words such as "never," "always," "ever," "totally," "nothing," "nobody," "all," "every," "everything," exaggerate and even absolutize what you perceive to be negative reality. These words are emotionally charged; they're "hot."

Think about how you'd feel if someone says, "You never do ...." Or, "Why don't you ever...?" Do you get a little hot under the collar? Most people do. Think about what others must feel when you say the same kinds of things to them.

A quick way to cool off hot words is to add "almost" to them.

Change, "You never take out the garbage," to "You almost never take out the garbage." This takes the heat off. It allows you to see reality more objectively and accurately. Perhaps the actual reality is, "You only take out the garbage on weekends."

- **Look for examples of mind-reading.**

Look for instances in which you project intent on other people or things. "That stupid computer is out to get me." "Those idiots are laughing behind my back." Or, "He'll never notice me, no matter what I do."

You don't know what the others (or computer) are thinking. You're guessing at their thoughts, or making them up. Then you react as if they were real.

So watch for the mind-reading, and try to be at ease with what you don't know.

And try to get accurate, objective information by asking questions.

- **Search for judgements.**

Statements such as, "This relationship sucks," or "I'll never learn to use this accounting program" do not describe reality; they judge it.

It helps to change them to accurate, objective descriptions of your reality. "I don't trust my partner to be on time." "This new program is difficult, but I think I'll get it."

Try this for practice: Think of something that's hard for you to do.

Say, "It's hard." And notice how you feel.

Then say, "It's so hard." And notice how you feel.

And, finally, say, "It's too hard." And notice how you feel.

Do you notice that the emotional charge increases with each statement? Can you see that it could reach a point where you say, "It's impossible," and then give up?

Notice when you're making judgements about reality, and change them into objective, emotionally neutral descriptions.

"This weather sucks," is a judgement. "It's 0 degrees C. and windy," is a description. Judgements are "hot." Descriptions are "cool."

- **Watch for name-calling.**

Whether directed at yourself or others, terms such as "wimp," "loser," "idiots," "jerk" and worse are forms of absolute judgement. They can quickly make you angry or sad.

- **Look for all-or-nothing thinking** such as, "My diet is wrecked; I might as well pig out." Or, "I didn't write this morning, so I might as well blow the whole day."
- **Look for exaggerations** such as, "She wrecked my life." "I was devastated when I didn't get the job." Oh, yeah? Like Haiti was devastated by the earthquake?"
- **Look for catastrophic conclusions** such as, "My whole life is totally and utterly messed up, so there's no point in me doing anything."
- **Finally, beware of the verb "to be."**

Read over the examples above. Notice how many of the troublesome statements start with or contain "I am...", "It is...", "I was...", "They are...", etc... These (and the deadly "you are...") are variations on the verb "to be."

The form "I am..." is particularly dangerous. When you say, "I am lazy," it implies that you are always and in every way "lazy"—i.e. a lazy person. It's a judgement. It is not true. Although, sometimes, you might act lazy, you are not lazy in general; you are not a lazy person.

"I act lazy" is a rational, useful description of your behaviour.

"I am lazy" is a judgement about your character. Distorted, dysfunctional, and dangerous, it leads to negative conclusions, nasty feelings and ineffective action.

### **Disputing Dysfunctional Bs: A Practice Example**

Let's use these instructions for monitoring and changing nutty, dysfunctional self-talk and work through a practice example together.

Imagine that you are trying to follow a healthy eating plan that avoids saturated fat and refined sugar. Then, a friend drops by to watch a video.

She brings a large tub of extra-creamy, double chocolate, coffee liqueur ice cream. Your all-time fave. You grab a big spoon. However, remembering the results you want to create, you restrain yourself and eat only a small helping. So far, so good.

Imagine, later, that you filter your thoughts through an absolute, "all or nothing" belief. You think, "Darn. I know I shouldn't eat any ice cream. I totally screwed up."

Such pessimistic (permanent, pervasive, personal) thoughts make you feel frustrated, guilty and ashamed. "I feel awful. Something must be wrong with me."

Worse, they further distort your thinking. Generalizing and absolutizing, you conclude, "I'm such a wimp. I have no willpower. I'll never live up to my choices. I'm hopeless. So, what's the point? I might as well just give up and eat the whole tub."

So you do. "Which," you then tell yourself, "just proves I am a spineless loser, with no willpower, headed straight for a life as a bulbous beachball."

**Would you be right?** Would you be justified in jumping to this conclusion?

Does eating one dish of ice cream mean that you are a wimp, with no willpower? Does it have to create guilt? Does it have to result in a downward spiral into negative thoughts, pessimistic imagining, self-defeating action and distressing consequences?

**No.**

Jumping from eating a small dish of ice cream to such pessimistic judgements about yourself and your future is irrational and self-defeating. It's nutty.

For most, like the imaginary you, above, it's almost impossible to catch and change self-defeating thinking in the heat of the moment. Often you don't even notice that your nutty thinking leads you to "eat the whole darn tub."

So what to do?

### **Change Your Beliefs; Change Your Feelings, Actions and Results**

Do what Andre did. Review the game tape. Practice the **ABCDE** process after the fact.

Look back on your reactions to an adversity, and see what hot thoughts and nutty beliefs led to ineffective actions and results.<sup>29</sup>

Let's revisit the ice cream example to examine the distorted thinking that led imaginary you to feel bad and take self-defeating action.

**A**, the adversity, was breaking your rule to not eat saturated fat and refined sugar. As well, the feelings of guilt and self-doubt that arose as a result of eating a small dish of ice cream led to a second-order adversity—feeling bad about feeling bad.

If you look closely at your **Bs**, you'll see that your harsh judgements about yourself—"I am a wimp," "I have "no willpower"—came from an irrational belief. "I should never break any of my food rules." (Nutty belief #1: I must do well. Always.)

It would be nice, preferable, and more effective if you didn't break your rules, but what law says you should never do so? None.

Sometimes you're less than perfect. So what? That's reality. Accept it. Act around it.

Your nutty thinking also led to faulty conclusions: "If I do screw up, I am a bad person (a wimp); I can't ever live up to the choices I make. I'm hopeless."

Such **permanent** (can't, never, always), **pervasive** (everything, anything), and **personal** (I, me, my fault) thinking (**Bs**) generates the pessimistic judgements that lead to **C: Consequences**—the awful feelings ("totally bummed") and ineffective actions (i.e. eating the whole tub).

Instead of helping, the eat-the-whole-thing strategy compounds your bad feelings. After the initial euphoria wears off, you feel guilty, even ashamed. Your stomach aches. So, then, you judge yourself more harshly—and feel worse.

It's a vicious circle. If you keep it up, you may spiral down the slippery slope toward feeling overwhelmed, helpless, hopeless, and, eventually, to despair.

### **Dispute Irrational Beliefs And Shift to Rational (Self-Supporting) Beliefs**

Let's try again. This time, imagine the ice cream episode through rational, optimistic and self-supporting thoughts and beliefs.

In this framework, you see your slight violation of food rules as merely a bump on the road to healthy eating—a temporary setback, specific to that situation.

You catch your "all or nothing" thinking. You see the nuttiness in saying, "I shouldn't eat any ice cream. You see the absoluteness of, "I have no will power." You see both as variations of the nutty "I must do well" belief.

You realize that eating a little ice cream does not mean you'll never live up to your food choices. You see there is no need to blame yourself for "screwing up." You see you're not a "wimp." And neither things, nor you, are "hopeless."

Instead, feeling only a little upset, you applaud yourself. You say, "Great. I can eat one dish of ice cream, and leave it at that. I don't have to be perfect. I don't have to feel guilty about minor deviations from my plan. I want to support my food choices. And I choose to do so. Next time I will."

When you're finished disputing and changing your **Bs**, you have new self-supporting beliefs. A new story. An energizing story that leads to effective actions.

Owning your desired result, you ask your friend to take home the rest of the ice cream. You feel good about aligning your actions with results. You feel proud, and committed to your goals. You took control of what you could, owned your result and feel good about feeling good—confident you can handle life's potholes. Thinking and feeling this way makes it easier for you to deal with the next challenge or setback you face.

You turn a downward spiral of judgements, negativity and self-defeating action into an upward spiral of learning, capacity building and more effective results.

## **E: Energize Yourself**

Summarizing your new thoughts into a new story makes you feel more grounded and optimistic than did your "hot" **Bs** and pessimistic story.

Your new story energizes you (**E**). It motivates you. The energy can be focused on questions such as, "What's next? Where do I want to go? What do I want to create? What actions would best support me in creating what I want?"

The answers will get you moving, taking action and creating desired results. If you're fluent in the creating approach, the **E-Energization** step helps you clarify current reality, set up creative tension, make good choices and take effective actions.

So, it's still simple—just as simple as **ABCDE**.

### **STOP: Stop-Think-Observe-Plan**

As well as the after-the-fact, review-the-game-film tool for catching and changing dysfunctional thinking, Andre and Sally also mastered another simple way to stop many of their nutty thoughts as they arose.

I use it myself. I've used it with Wilderness Leadership trainees, and with executives and managers in mountain-based team-building retreats.

When adversity strikes, or even if you just feel down or irritated, use the acronym STOP to interrupt and shift your negative thinking.

It helps you ground your thoughts and action in objective reality. It enables you to own, focus on, and create results you want.

### **STOP**

When you start to feel upset, just saying "**Stop!**" can disrupt your automatic thinking. It can help you **step back**, and then go through the other steps: **Think. Observe. Plan.**

After using the word "stop" to interrupt your reactive thinking and feelings, take a deep breath and relax. Then think.

### **THINK**

Notice any "hot" feelings: such as fear, anger, frustration, sadness, etc....

Ask, "What am I thinking and saying to myself to create these feelings? What story am I telling? Am I jumping to **A-C** conclusions? Overlooking my **Bs**?"

If you can, write out a quick **ABCDE** process. I carry a small, pocket sized notebook, partly for that purpose. It's much easier to do on paper than in your head.

Search your **Bs** for nutty thinking and trigger words that give rise to hot feelings and negative impulses. Then dispute, and change those thoughts.

Summarize your revised **Bs**. Tell yourself a new story about the adversity, and your ability to handle it. Your new story will enable you to take a more objective and useful view of the reality you face.

### **OBSERVE**

After you've had time to stop and think, you'll be better able to observe and describe reality accurately, objectively and in an emotionally neutral way.

Sometimes you have to toggle back and forth between "think" and "observe" to get a clear sense of what's going on—in the situation, with others and within you.

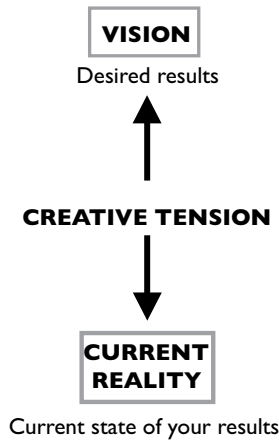
Describe your observations accurately, objectively and emotionally neutrally.

## PLAN

Ask, "What results do I want to create? What do I have to work with? What are my first steps?" In that order.

The **results-focused creating framework** is driven by a clear vision of results. It is grounded in an accurate, objective assessment of current reality. It focuses on actions that honour reality and support your vision.

Holding vision and current reality in mind together sets up creative tension, which energizes, contains and guides your actions. It increases your chances of consistently moving in the direction of desired results. It also drives out negative tension.



Creative tension provides a planning framework—a possibility space—in which you can experiment and explore. It integrates rationality and intuition. It energizes you. It helps you evaluate results, see failure as feedback, and make adjustments to actions.

Together with the motivational energy from a clear, compelling vision and the energy of momentum generated by successful actions, the form and energy of creative tension helps move you from where you are to where you truly want to be.

### Creating What Matters

The **ABCs** and **STOP** processes help you clarify your thinking and mellow out your emotions. They put you on good terms with your reality.

Together, these techniques ensure that your beliefs provide a solid foundation on which to create what matters. They help you embrace and rise above adversity—and move in the direction of your dreams.

Remember, though, insight and understanding, by themselves, are not enough.

Like any new skills, to get good enough that they work when you need them, you'll need to make them into strong, default habits—your go to habits.

To do so, you'll need to practice these skills even when you don't need them.

You'll need to practice them when you don't feel like doing them—especially when you don't feel like doing them.

That takes "grit."



PART

3

HOW!

*"Nobody is talented enough to not have to work hard,  
and that's what grit allows you to do."*

— Angela Duckworth  
Psychology Professor

## CHAPTER 7

## GETTING GRITTY

## PASSION-DRIVEN PRACTICE

## AND PERSEVERANCE

*"Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.  
Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will  
not: unrewarded genius is almost a proverb.  
Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts.  
Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."  
— Calvin Coolidge, 30th President of USA*

There's an old joke about a tourist in New York who stops a man carrying a violin case and asks, "Please, sir, can you tell me the best way to get to Carnegie Hall?"

The man, world-famous violinist [Jascha Heifetz](#), replies, "My son, there is only one way to get to Carnegie Hall. That is to practice, practice, practice."

Heifetz's advice turns out to be useful, not just for musicians trying to make it to Carnegie Hall, but for anyone trying to create new skills, habits and results.

**Practice Builds Mastery**

Emotional mastery, like other forms of mastery takes practice—lots of practice.

Remember that mastery is a process during which difficult things gradually become easier and pleasurable through practice.

Insight and understanding are necessary, but, by themselves, not enough. "Knowledge, states an African proverb, "is just a rumour until it gets into your muscles."

You can know about emotional mastery, self-talk, **CORE**, the **ABCs** and **STOP**. However, unless you use these techniques regularly—practicing them until they become second nature—you won't be able to use them when you most need them.

To turn the insights of this book into useful skills, practice them deliberately—consciously—until they get into your muscles. Practice them until they become your automatic go-to habits. Then they'll be there when you need them most.

### **Practice Deliberately**

Deliberate practice means working on skills and principles that are hard for you.

First, isolate a skill and practice it until it's easy. Then, practice it in concert with other skills until you master them in context.

I was a pretty good skier, I thought, until I failed the entry test to instructor school. They agreed I was "pretty good," but said I had to learn how to steer.

They set me up with an experienced instructor. She took me to the mountains, put me into the "snowplow" position, and showed me how to steer. When I could steer the snowplow correctly, she showed me how to steer in the "stem" position. When I mastered that step, she showed me how to steer parallel turns.

Over two days, she had me deliberately practice steering in all kinds of conditions: flat, steep, bumps, power, crud, and at different speeds. All day: steer, steer, steer.

During the week, I went to the local hill at night and practiced what she'd taught me, over and over. I asked other instructors to watch and give me feedback. Steering C-shaped turns on icy runs was hardest, so I deliberately worked on getting good at it.

The next weekend, I retested and was admitted to the Instructor course. I not only got a job teaching nights, my overall skiing ability improved greatly.

With continued practice and occasional coaching, I progressed to a point where I felt in control in almost all conditions, at any speed. I still haven't fully mastered skiing; there's always more to learn. Through deliberate practice the difficult parts are gradually becoming easier and more pleasurable.

### **Practicing Emotional Mastery**

It's much the same when you're developing emotional mastery skills.

Isolate a skill. Practice until it's easy. Then practice it in context.

If monitoring self-talk is easy, and disputing negative thoughts/beliefs is difficult, deliberately practice disputing until it's easy, too.

Continue to monitor self-talk, and put extra effort into recognizing, disputing and changing your nutty thoughts and beliefs. Use the forms in the Appendix to help you.

When I'm down, I'm pretty good at disputing irrational statements such as, "I'm no good at anything." I'm not so good at amassing evidence that the opposite is true. So I work on it; I deliberately practice listing examples of things I am good at.

Deliberate practice is hard. You have to think about what you're doing. You have to try it, work out the difficult parts and try again. And again, and again ... until you get it right. This takes time.

Researchers K. Anders Ericsson and Neil Charness showed that deliberate practice is key to mastery and elite-level skill across almost every field. Developing expert status in almost any area, they say, takes about 10,000 hours of dedicated, deliberate practice.<sup>30</sup>

You may not aspire to the highest levels of mastery, but you do want to be able manage your moods and create what matters, with whatever life gives you. Yes?

After twenty-five years of teaching and coaching people in the skills of creating and emotional mastery, I know that those who practice deliberately and consistently do produce results. Those who just think about this stuff, or dabble in it, don't.

### **Practice Plus "Grit" Is Key To Success**

World class cellist Shauna Ralston says she practices seven hours a day, except when she's on tour, and then she only practices five hours.

Olympic figure skaters practice each element in their programs up to 14,000 times in the year leading up to the Games.

"Young gun" poker players win many of the televised, million dollar tournaments. They play hundreds of games a day, online, on multiple tables. Many play 20,000 games a year. That's more than old school players played in twenty years. No wonder these kids are so good. After playing for less than four years, [Annette Obrestad](#) won \$2.1 million in the World Series of Poker Europe Main Event—the day before her 19th birthday.

What is it that keeps elite level musicians, athletes and poker players at their practice? What powers such hard workers toward mastery?

Money, sure. But it's always more than money. It's prestige. It's respect. It's status. And, it's that ineffable feeling of mastery—control of your own powers. Developing such mastery, says psychologist Angela Duckworth, takes "grit."<sup>31</sup>

Duckworth worked with a range of groups from Scripps National Spelling Bee finalists to underperforming school kids to boot camp cadets at West Point. She defines “grit” as “the combination of very high persistence and high passion for an objective.”

An example of a gritty athlete is tennis great Novak Djokovic. In the semi-finals of the 2011 US Open, he hit what many described as “an impossible shot,” and beat his long-time rival Roger Federer.

Was the winning shot—described by John McEnroe as “one of the all-time great shots” and by Federer as “lucky”—a function of luck or confidence? Or grit?

All of the above, probably. In this short [video interview](#),<sup>32</sup> Djokovic attributes it to a mix of confidence, self-belief, anticipation and hand-eye coordination. “All of that,” he says, “comes as a result of doing the work.”

Nole (as Serb friends call him) had practiced the shot since he was nine years old. As a result, he says, “When you put in so many hours, so much work on the court, you have more probability that shot will happen.”

Another example is legendary golfer [Babe Didrikson Zaharias](#).<sup>33</sup>

When Babe won the British woman's golf championship, people assumed she was a natural athlete. Not really. For thirteen years, she had hit as many as 1,000 balls each afternoon, getting feedback about her stance, swing and other skills. That's grit!

Whether an athlete, musician, writer, entrepreneur, parent, or just an ordinary person wanting to create extraordinary results, it all takes practice and mastery. You have to do the work.

“Putting in your miles,” as one of my ski coaches put it, increases the probability that you'll be able to do what you need to do, when you need to do it.

To put in the miles and do the work, you need grit—passion-driven perseverance.

High levels of perseverance and passion enable gritty people to stay focused on long-term goals—in spite of pressure. And make “impossible shots” at the right time.

## The Awesome Power of Practice

Duckworth states that “effort” (focused, deliberate practice) does not just add to your skill and talent; it multiplies it. It also multiplies effectiveness and level of achievement.

Remember this formula: **Achievement = Skill x Effort.** It explains why doing the work can lead to “impossible” results.

The equation holds true for developing the **ABCs** and all the skills that comprise emotional mastery and creating. Doing the work will multiply your natural talent.

Practicing the **ABCs** will not make you perfect, but it will make you better at doing them. Doing them will make you more realistic and optimistic. It will make your thinking self-supportive. It will make you feel better, take more effective actions and help you create the results you most want. It will help you turn good into great.

So do the work. Practice, practice, practice.

### **Emotional Mastery Is Not Aspirin For The Soul**

Some clients get good at the **ABCs** or monitoring self-talk—until they feel better. Then they stop practicing and slip back into old habits. The distress and bad feelings return. So, they start practicing again. Does this pattern sound familiar?

It's the oscillating pattern that underlies the "diet-quit-diet-..." problem-solving approach we saw in Chapter Two. It's the same pattern aspirin takers follow. Sporadic practice can give you relief, but it will not add up to real and lasting results.

World famous Polish pianist Ignacy (Jan) Paderewski was a believer in practice.

"If I miss one day of practice," he said, "I notice it. If I miss two days, the critics notice it. If I miss three days, the audience notices it."

Practice leads to results. Consistent practice leads to consistent results. Consistent results accumulate into mastery, success, and even greatness.

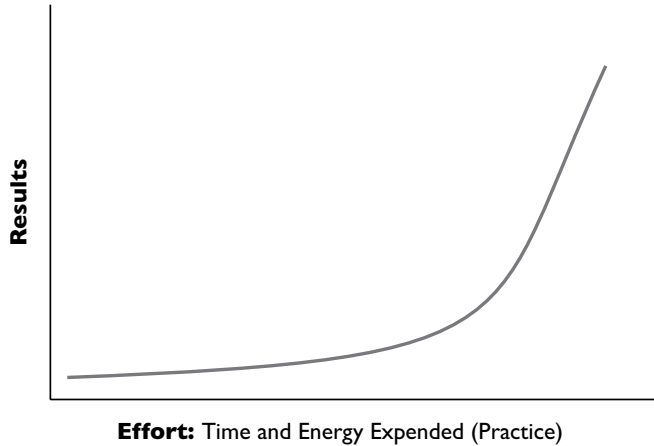
### **Work The Learning Curve**

Most people I talk with don't understand how the learning curve works. They think the steep part of the curve is the hard part. It's not.

The Learning Curve is based on [Pareto's Principle](#)<sup>34</sup> ("the 80/20 rule"). The difficult part of the curve is the long, flat part at the beginning. There you slog through almost endless effort without much success. The first 80% of effort produces 20% of results.

As you put in time and effort—practice—the curve steepens. Results come easier.

On a learning curve, "steep" means accelerating returns; logarithmic increases in learning. Steep is good. The last 20% of your effort produces 80% of your results.

**The Learning Curve:**

If they don't understand these dynamics, people slogging on the flat part of the curve and think they're climbing an impossibly steep slope can get frustrated and quit—often just before the curve begins its sweet, upward arc.

The key is staying on the curve—doing the work—until it steepens and mastery emerges. Woody Allen captured the essence of this phenomenon when he quipped, “85% of success comes from just showing up each day.”

**Start Small; Scale Up**

Choose small challenges to practice with. They're easier to succeed at. A series of small successes builds momentum and moves you across the flat part of the learning curve.

"Get good at applying the **ABCs** to small, simple irritants," Joe advised me. "Then, as your skill and confidence increase, gradually scale up to examining the larger, more complex issues that make you deeply anxious and depressed."

I took his advice to heart. During the first year that I worked on emotional mastery, I filled a 250-page "3-Subject" notebook with **ABCs** examining things that irritated and upset me. I filled out dozens and dozens of **ABCs** sheets I'd printed and spread around my home, office and car. I even had them beside my bathtub.

Many of the things I wrote about were trivial.

My wife misplaced my favourite pen. A waiter brought me the wrong entree. A shoelace broke in an almost new trail-running shoe. A friend failed to show for coffee.

Not earth-shaking, for sure. But they were easier to practice on than the daunting existential questions that I couldn't even formulate, let alone answer.

Practicing on small adversities, I got better at doing the **ABCs**. It wasn't too long before I could apply them to more complex issues. Eventually, I looked directly into the core fears and issues that had almost driven me over the edge.

Doing hundreds of **ABCs** not only pulled me out despair—and potential suicide—it helped me see how my nutty thinking gave rise to desperate feelings and actions.

Doing the **ABCs** helped me feel good about myself, my work and my world. It helped me master the creating skills. It helped me stick with things, in spite of the difficulties I encountered and the adversity I faced. It helped make me gritty.

I, too, had to learn that practicing these skills is not a one-time thing. It's not about relief. It's about accumulating results—mastery. It's also about creating a practice that you do regularly, just as you would do regular yoga or cello practice.

I still set aside time regularly, and do **ABCs** in a journal I keep just for that process.

### **A Practice ABC Exercise**

A client had difficulty with the **ABCs** because she applied them to large adversities. Writing out **Bs**, she replayed the old story. She'd get so upset she couldn't do **D** and **E**.

I suggested she scale back, practice on small irritants that she could do quickly and with less upsetting **Bs**. She's a great client and, when she practices, she gets things right.

Here's an example of one of her practice **ABCs**.

#### **"Bored On Friday Night..."**

**A:** bored on a Friday night, starting to ruminate on my thoughts and getting upset....

**B:** see left-hand column in "D" below....

**C:** thoughts getting out of control; me getting discouraged and depressed....



## D:

I am bored so I must be a poor planner because people who know how to plan their lives are not sitting around bored.	Emotional reasoning	Nonsense! I have a list of things to do, just pick one and do it. I am tired after a great game last night so I am not up for a long bike ride so I can and will go for a very short one just to get outside and appreciate the fine evening...
Busy people are productive and don't have time to be bored, so I guess I am not very productive.	Emotional reasoning	Nonsense.... I used to be "busy" most of the time and did not have time to be depressed, but also was not doing what I wanted to do either...
And no wonder I didn't get anything done today...	All or nothing thinking...	I got lots of things done today...
I should go out for a ride or should have had something planned...	Should statement	I have choices and once I get started I will enjoy it. Apply Bruce's 15-minute test from Simplicity & Success.
And since I didn't I am doomed to sit here and commiserate....	Catastrophizing...	Only if I indulge in this kind of thinking.
I must be some sort of loser...		Nonsense. I don't need to be around others constantly to be happy.
I feel like getting some pie at the store but I know I shouldn't. I am always doing that and I want to get fit.	All or nothing thinking....	I have not had any dessert for almost a month.... Get some dessert and celebrate this as a reward. Then cut it out for another week or so. One dessert a week is not going to cause diabetes or keep me fat...

**E:** I feel way better now. Off to get pie and celebrate my success at doing this **ABC** exercise. I think I deserve it. (This entire episode lasted about 5 minutes and if I had continued, I would have been in the dumps for most of the evening.)

This client used a slightly different format than Andre's. Because she had prior experience with psychologist David Burns' version of the **ABCs**—"The Three-Column Exercise"<sup>35</sup>—she included and named her nutty thinking in the centre column.

This is an excellent example the **ABCs**. It interrupts her nutty thinking. It prevents it (and her) from spinning out of control. It allows her to substitute rational, evidence-based thoughts that lead to positive emotions and effective actions.

Also, it's important to note that it only took her five minutes to change her mood.

### **You Can't Do This Stuff In Your Head**

Even after years of practice, I can't do more than a very simple **ABCDE** work-up in my head. Nor can most people. Why?

Because working memory, the part with which we process information and make decisions, is very small. Neuroscientists tell us that we can only process seven plus-or-minus two bits of information at one time (if we don't somehow commit it to deeper or external memory).<sup>36</sup>

The simple, "Bored On Friday Night" **ABC** includes over 50 discrete bits of information. Had my client tried to do it in her head, she would have gotten hopelessly muddled. Her thinking would have spun out of control, and the consequences nasty.

Our tiny working memory (7+/-2 bits of info) explains why remembering 10- or 11-digit telephone numbers is difficult. It's why, when we go to the store to "just pick up a few things," we often forget most of those things. It's why we make lists, use spreadsheets and rely on calendars, maps and charts rather than memory alone.

Working memory is easily overwhelmed, and when it is, you feel overwhelmed.

Even small situations that irritate you, like standing in a slow-moving line, can involve more info (thoughts, beliefs, judgements) than you can easily process. Very quickly, you feel overwhelmed, angry, and are likely to react counter-productively.

If you wrote it out, using the **ABCDE** format, you could process your thoughts, beliefs and feelings in an organized way, and make changes. Often, you won't be able to do your **ABCs** until after the fact. Indeed, the "review the game tape" process is a key to deliberately practicing and getting better at this skill.

Doing a lot of them, after the fact, will enable you to get better at catching your negative thoughts in the moment, before they overwhelm you.

So, resist the urge to pick a complex adversity. Start small and scale up.

Remember, it helps to see the **ABCs** as a regular practice, as you would anything you really wanted to learn, such as playing the piano or speaking fluent Spanish or doing Yoga. Schedule it into your days and weeks. Practice deliberately. It will help.

### **Don't Assume You're Already Doing The ABCs**

Sally, who I introduced earlier, could not do the **ABCs** because she was stuck in her "I never get upset" belief. She couldn't think of small irritants that bugged her, and claimed it didn't matter because she'd been "doing this ABC stuff in my head for years."

In our sessions, I sensed Sally was so angry with her husband that she was thinking of leaving him. Her language was peppered with trigger words, blaming and name-calling. As well, her frustration at her inability to create a business grew daily. She also seemed angry and disappointed with herself for being "incompetent."

When I pointed these things out to her, she steadfastly refused to believe that "any" of these things "ever" bothered her. She kept repeating, "I can't do the **ABCs** because I never have any adversities to write down."

Just as I was considering ending our relationship, she emailed to tell me that she had just had an interesting "epiphany."

"I had been standing in line at Tim Hortons donut shop when the cash register stopped working," she wrote. "A young clerk couldn't get it restarted. After silently cursing the company, the clerk and the machine, I lost patience and stormed out of the store.

"As I stomped down the street, muttering to myself about "being late," I realized I wasn't going anywhere. Suddenly, I thought, "I'm pissed off. I'm upset, but not sure what about. I think this is an adversity. Hey! I can do that exercise Bruce bugs me to do."

She did. And it worked. After a quick review of the donut shop event that she scribbled out in a notebook in her car, she realized she had thought angry thoughts, and those thoughts led to her stomping off without her donuts.

When she got home, she examined the experience using the full **ABCDE** template. She recognized her nutty thinking, trigger words and judgements, and how they generated negative feelings and counter-productive actions. She disputed those thoughts, changed them, and calmed herself down.

"Wow," she thought. "This is very helpful."

After a few more small practice attempts, Sally became a fan of the **ABCs** and began to practice them regularly. As she did, she realized that she was often frustrated, angry and anxious. She saw that it was mostly her own nutty thinking that upset her, not events or other people.

She also realized that her husband supported her unconditionally. She grasped that she didn't have to start a business to please him, or justify his financial support, or get away from him, as she'd been telling herself. This insight allowed her to see that she could do what she wanted to do, not what she thought she should do.

Freed from the strong, almost unconscious "shoulds" she had imposed upon herself, she practiced the **ABCs** and the creating skills with small projects, gradually increasing her capacity in both. The last time she wrote me, she said, "It's working. Things with my hubby are better than ever. I don't have to prove anything to him, or to myself. I've started doing what I love. I'm writing a novel, and I'm about half way through. It's pretty good and I hope to publish it in about six months."

That's what I mean by starting small and scaling up. I wished her well with the book.

### To Make Practice Easy: Use The Forms

I have appended two forms that you can use to write out you're **As, Bs, Cs, Ds** and **Es**.

The first is designed to print out and write on by hand. The second is a template for use on a computer. It has columns and expanding boxes. Write your nutty thoughts in the left-hand column. Dispute and change them in the right-hand column.<sup>37</sup>

I recommend you experiment with both. See which works best for you.

I practice the **ABCs** in 3 main ways:

1. I use the template for complex, difficult issues that I really struggle with,
2. I use the printed sheets to write on when I'm away from my computer, and
3. With simple issues and irritants, I do quick versions of the **ABCDE** process on the print out forms, or in my journal. Sometimes, this doesn't work, so I go back to #1.

My ability to do the **ABCs** in my journal, a process I call Active Journaling,<sup>38</sup> emerged only after a great deal of practice with the printed sheets and the template.

I suggest you print out a bunch of forms, and keep them on your desk, beside your bed, in the car, beside your reading chair or anywhere handy. When you face a situation in which you think you might wrongly make an A-C connection, or have done so, use a form to identify and dispute irrational thoughts, and energize yourself for action.

The key is to practice, and keep practicing. You want to develop the fluency to do the **ABCs** and other skills—even when you don't feel like doing them, even when adversity threatens to overwhelm you. That's when they're most useful.

In the final chapter, I'll try to pull together all the threads we've looked at so far. I'll share a story about a remarkable young man who suffered a serious, career-threatening injury that led to deep depression and despair.

## CHAPTER 8

# THE GIFT IN ADVERSITY

*"I've always found a gift hidden in every adversity.  
That doesn't make adversity easier; it only makes it more meaningful."*  
– Dan Millman, *Way Of The Peaceful Warrior*

Dave was the son of a former client of mine. He played soccer on an elite, under-17 team. University and professional teams courted him with scholarship offers. A spot on the "development squad" of a professional team looked likely.

Then, during an unscheduled pick-up game with teammates, Dave collided with another player at high speed. He broke his leg, tore cartilage and ligaments in his knee and ruptured his Achilles tendon. His season was over. And, possibly, his soccer career.

He told me later that, "After the collision, I felt devastated. Laying on the field, I knew it was really, really bad. It wasn't just pain; it was feeling helpless. I wanted it to not have happened; to go back. I felt sure I'd never play again. It scared the crap out of me."

A tendon-repair operation went well. As did knee reconstruction. Dave's lower leg was pinned in three places, and he had to wear a combination cast/knee brace for eight weeks, and the knee brace alone for another eight.

Although his doctors gave him a positive prognosis for recovery, they could not assure him that he'd play again, especially at an elite level. Shocked and disheartened, Dave told himself that he "couldn't stand" life without high-level soccer.

Down and dispirited, Dave entered rehab.

## Reality Bites

Rehab was hard for Dave. On the one hand, he desperately wanted to "beat this thing." He was desperate for quick results. When results didn't come quickly, he felt frustrated and angry.

After a couple of unsuccessful attempts to do a new exercise, he'd judge himself (or the rehab staff) "a failure," and quit.

Success had always come easy to Dave. In school, he made great grades without studying. In soccer, he'd been a phenom, moving up effortlessly through the ranks. Relying on natural talent alone, Dave hadn't developed a work ethic. He didn't respect deliberate practice. He mostly just "cruised" his way to success.

Studies show that phenoms in sport, chess, music and other areas rarely make the big leagues.<sup>39</sup> When they run up against players with the same level of talent (and, in sports, the same height and body size) who have developed "grit"—the ability to practice, stick with it and grow their skills—most phenoms can't keep up. They fall by the wayside as harder working, grittier players take their spots.

This is the dilemma Andre faced, working with other bright MBAs in finance. Neither he nor Dave had developed a solid work ethic, or an appreciation for grit and practice.

During rehab, Dave would learn that success requires more, and harder, work than he'd ever imagined. He would see that only a great deal of practice and re-learning would make him physically strong and agile enough to resume his soccer career. He'd realize that mental and emotional resilience were sources of strength that he had overlooked, and needed to develop.

First, Dave had to learn to deal with failure—how to accept a reality that differed from the one he longed for.

## **A Downward Spiral**

Dave's impatience for results and his quickness to judge a lack of results as failure took a toll on his emotions.

Fear, frustration, anger and sadness were never far from the surface. Tantrums and meltdowns were common, especially during the early stages of rehab.

As he failed to make progress—and yelling at the therapists didn't help—Dave began to doubt he'd "ever" make progress. He feared he'd "never" recover. He imagined his big league dreams slipping away from him.

Doubting himself and his dreams, he lost hope. He focused on worst-case scenarios, and often felt like giving up. In spite of the staff's attempts to motivate him, his mood worsened. Feeling victimized, Dave adopted a "Why me?" attitude. And asked, "If I can't get back to where I was, what's the point?"

Then, his inner bonfire would flare up again. He'd reconnect with his dreams and get himself up, at least until the next "failure." Then, back down he'd go.

Stuck in a problem-focused approach, Dave flipped back and forth between his desire to play elite soccer and his deep fear that it wouldn't be possible.

He tried using willpower to force himself to be positive. He tried scaring himself into action, imagining what would happen if he didn't try. Both approaches sucked his energy, though neither worked for long. Soon, Dave would feel like giving up again.

See-sawing between desire and helplessness, he grew more frustrated and slid deeper into despair. Eventually, the "hopelessness" of his situation "overwhelmed" him. He lapsed into a deep depression.

Convinced that there was an alternative to focusing on and fighting against reality, Dave's Dad persuaded him to contact me.

### **Getting Started; Doing The Work**

Dave and I worked together for nearly nine months, developing generic emotional mastery and creating skills.

We started with the simple emotional mastery skills, such as monitoring self-talk, looking for trigger words, searching out "shoulds" and "musts". Then we worked on the **ABCs**. I showed him how nutty thinking can lead to nutty feelings and actions.

With practice and coaching help, Dave learned to describe reality in emotionally neutral ways—to see his reality as it really was. He learned how to not make reality out to be worse, or better, than it actually was.

He learned to avoid jumping to faulty conclusions based on his feelings alone. He saw that distorted thinking about his situation and his future gave rise to his self-defeating emotions and actions.

We also worked on his **CORE** skills. Using the **ABCs** tool and journaling, Dave practiced controlling what he could, and accepting what he couldn't. He practiced owning the results he wanted. He stopped thinking that his whole life was affected by his injury. He came to see that the pain and fear would pass. His explanatory style became more realistic and optimistic.

As it did, the tantrums and meltdowns became fewer and happened less often. Dave's depression lifted, and, although he was unsure about it, he embraced the creating approach with something resembling enthusiasm.

With the creating approach, we also started small. Dave learned the basic skills and structure by designing and crafting small, concrete creations such as origami figures he gave out as gifts to staff and visitors and an illustrated journal describing his rehab journey. He created more iTunes playlists that I could count, burning them to CD's and giving them to friends. He designed and made his own "thank you" cards.



Later, after he moved back home, he created an organized, inspiring bedroom that included a writer's nook—a practice space where he journaled and did his **ABCs**.

As he got more mobile, and with help from his Dad, he created a work out room in his basement. Also, with help from his physical therapists, he created his own on-going rehab program, which he followed much more religiously than previous programs.

### **The Gift In Adversity**

Slowly, as the creating skills and structure became a part of him, Dave realized that he could also apply those skills to his life and career goals. His confidence increased as his competence in both his specific and generic skills expanded.

He decided he wanted to heal fully, to get fit and strong and back on his soccer-based career path. He grasped the difference between fighting injury and creating what he wanted: a fit, healthy, soccer-playing body, mind and spirit.

He crafted a compelling vision of himself, fully healed, stronger than before the accident and playing at an elite level. Then, considering his current reality, he made a strategic choice to take the university route toward professional status.

Clarifying and reaffirming his goals in clear, compelling visions shifted Dave's focus. He committed—i.e. made a conscious choice—to think and act in ways that supported that vision.

Working with the **emotional mastery** skills and the **creating** framework, he built resilience. Little by little, he learned to bounce back from rehab's hassles and setbacks. He also found it easier to deal with life's other challenges, such as catching up and keeping up with school work, and maintaining a good relationship with his girlfriend.

As he progressed, he learned about himself. He began to see more clearly how he thought, felt and made decisions. He realized that he liked learning, even the repetitive practice and exercises rehab required. He embraced the challenge of seeing his situation as an opportunity to learn and grow as a person. He even started to see his injury—and all that he was learning—as a blessing; a gift in the adversity.

That's not to say the process was easy. It wasn't.

### **From Victim to Winner**

Along the way, there were many mistakes, set-backs and failures. Many emotional ups and downs. Dave still felt down a good part of the time, but not depressed. He realized that, with work, he could get himself up, and knew how to do so.

When I started with Dave, we assessed his "positivity ratio" as 1:2. That is, for every positive thought he had, Dave had two negative thoughts. No wonder he felt depressed. Anything lower than a 3:1 (positive to negative) ratio is likely to tip you on to that slippery slope toward chronic unhappiness, depression and despair.<sup>40</sup>

Getting good at monitoring and changing his self-talk marked a turning point for Dave. When he saw how his negative, self-defeating language, thoughts, beliefs, and stories negatively affected his emotions, actions and results, he redoubled his efforts to learn new, self-supporting strategies.

He sought out his "shoulds." He let go of demands and focused on desires. He practiced catching nutty, dysfunctional thoughts and stories. Then he disputed and changed them to more realistically optimistic ones that supported his desired results.

Slowly his positivity ratio moved upward.

The start-small, scale-up approach worked well for Dave. He gradually increased his ability and confidence in himself, and in the techniques he was learning. As he saw results and patterns of success emerge, Dave fully embraced the idea that practice and perseverance, not just talent, were the keys to his success. He got grittier.

It showed in his work in rehab, his work with me and in his school work. Over time, Dave increased his positivity ratio from 2:1 to 6:1.

His motivation increased. He generated energy to burn. He felt better about himself, rehab and his future. With increasing resilience, he dealt better with setbacks and saw failure mostly as feedback. He became better focused, and willing to work harder.

### **From Devastation To Full Recovery—And Increased Wisdom**

Eventually, Dave got himself back on track and headed in the direction of his dreams.

He completed high school with grades that earned him an academic scholarship to a local college. He began to play a little soccer for fun. After eighteen months, Dave's doctors told him he was fully recovered.

Over the next year, he threw himself into physical training, and got fitter and stronger than ever. Speed and confidence took longer. As he eased back into competitive soccer, and got both practice and game time, both gradually returned.

In spite of setbacks, time spent on the bench and in the trainer's room, Dave worked hard, and did well. Two years later, he was recruited by a prestigious western US university, and made their varsity team. He still has his sights set on making the Major Soccer League. Meanwhile, he and his partner Janine have part-time jobs coaching disadvantaged kids near the university they attend.

"Working with you helped so much," Dave told me in one of the many emails we exchanged after our formal coaching ended.

"It helped me get out of my funk. It got me thinking right. If I hadn't learned the emotional skills and creating stuff, I might have given up. I might have just laid back and let things happen. Working with you helped me see a bigger picture.

"The two key techniques were recognizing my nutty self-talk and doing the **ABCs**. They helped me pull out of my depression. If I get off-track, those two things get me unstuck and keep me going. And the creating skills keep me from falling back into that dark place where I felt like packing it in.

"Another thing that helps is the learning curve. It showed me why I should work hard and practice and build momentum. I still have your diagram taped to my computer."

In another email, he said, "The creating stuff helps me learn from mistakes—in soccer and in school. And the emotional stuff gives me the grit that I need to handle adversity, and keep on keeping on. I really like this stuff. Now, I'm passing it on to the kids we work with. I think it'll help them a lot."

In another, he posed the question, "You know what the most important lesson was you taught me?" Then, he answered it.

"Don't just think about this stuff; do it. And do it over and over and over, until you get it down. That's huge in soccer. And pretty well everything else. Now, when I get stuck, I think about you saying, 'STOP! Do the **ABCs**. Practice, practice, practice.' And then I drag my butt back to work. Pretty quick, I'm back on track."

I choked up a bit as I thought, "Thanks, Dave."

Our emails and occasional Skype calls gradually tapered off. With professional coaches and sports psychologists connected with the soccer team, Dave didn't need much help from me anymore. Mostly, he wrote just to let me know how he was doing.

"It's still hard, sometimes," he said in one of the last emails. "But as long as I practice this stuff, I stay focused. I make progress. And even if I don't make the MSL, I'm thinking that working with young athletes could be a very appealing career choice."

### **Will It Work For You?**

The same skills and approach that worked for Dave, also worked for Andre, Sally and me. We all improved our lives and our work with this stuff. We use it all the time. Andre recently sent me a video of himself in which he was describing the creating skills and structure at a Toastmasters club that he founded. Sally's still working on her book, discovering it's harder than she expected to get published, and thinking about doing an ebook.

At this point, you might be asking, "will it work for me?"

Yes—if you practice it.

If you don't practice, it probably won't work. You can't think your way into generic skill and mastery. You've got to work at it and get it into your muscles—into your head, heart and hands. So, if you practice, if you put in the effort, if you persevere and learn from what you do and what you experience, it will work.

As it did for Dave, Andre, Sally and me, practicing new ways to think and talk to yourself can help create the results you desire in your life, work and relationships.

It's not magic. It's not The Secret. It's not old fashioned Positive Thinking.

Practice doesn't make you perfect, but it makes you stronger. It makes you more realistically optimistic. It makes you more resilient and emotionally effective. When you do the work, you feel more truly competent and authentically confident. That helps you act more successfully in all aspects of your life.

"We are creatures of our thinking," said author and educator Gordon B. Hinkley. "We can talk ourselves into defeat—or we can talk ourselves into victory."

**What do you want to talk yourself into?**

# APPENDIX

## *THE ABCs of Realistic Optimism (Print Version)*

**A—ADVERSITY** (What happens to you. Events. Circumstances. Problems...)

**B—BELIEFS** (What you think, assume, and judge about the adversity; what you say to self or others about what happens to you.)

**C—Consequences** (How you feel and what you do about what happens)

**D—Dispute** (Challenge your irrational beliefs, judgements, and assumptions. Show that these beliefs are not true, that they are distortions, exaggerations, etc.... Show evidence about what is true.)

**E—Energize** (Rewrite your **Bs**. Replace dysfunctional thoughts, beliefs, and assumptions with functional thinking. Note how your new story changes your feelings and actions—and your energy. Use that energy to ask, "What now?" What do I want to create?)

*The ABC's MS Word Template (For use on your computer)\**

**A—Adversity** (What happens to you. Events. Circumstances. Problems...)

**B- Beliefs** (What you think, assume and judge relative to A—the adversity. What you say to yourself or others about what happens to you.)

**C—Consequences** (How you feel and act in relation to A—adversity and B—your beliefs about the adversity.)

**D—Dispute:** Examine, challenge, and dispute beliefs that lead to negative consequences—to feeling and acting badly. Place the dysfunctional **B's** in the Beliefs column. Then dispute them. Examine each thought/belief and ask, "Is this true? Can I absolutely know it is true? How do I feel and act when I hold on to this thought? How might I feel and act if I could let go of it?" Show evidence for what is true.

**Summary of revised thoughts and beliefs – Your New Story:**

List your new thoughts and beliefs, and shape them into a new story.



**Energization & Action:** (Given my revised thoughts and beliefs, how do I feel now? What results do I want to create? What action can I take?)

\*If you downloaded this ebook from [Smashwords.com](http://Smashwords.com), email me at [Bruce@BruceElkin.com](mailto:Bruce@BruceElkin.com), and ask me to send you the MS Word **ABCs** Template.

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Finally, I'd like to thank all my clients, especially those who have mastered the **ABCs** and other emotional mastery techniques and keep proving to me, over and over, that this stuff really works.

If I forgot anyone, please forgive me. **Thank you, all!**

# FURTHER READING and FREE COACHING INFORMATION

- For more background and practice suggestions on the **ABCs**, self-talk, and managing your moods by changing your thinking, please see my eBook **Emotional Mastery: Manage Your Moods and Create What Matters Most—With Whatever Life Gives You**. It is available on my website at <http://www.bruceelkin.com/emotional-mastery.html>

If you're a starving artist or athlete and can't afford to buy the ebook, email me at [Bruce@BruceElkin.com](mailto:Bruce@BruceElkin.com) and I'll see what I can do.

- For information about my approach to resilience building, dealing with adversity and creating what matters most, see:

## **THRIVE! Create What Matters In Challenging Times & Beyond**

Available for download to almost any computer, e-reader or smart phone at <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/90569>

THRIVE! is also available as a free PDF on my website at <http://www.bruceelkin.com/thrive-e-book.html>

- For a more detailed approach to "creating," see my book **Simplicity and Success: Creating the Life You Long For** [Trafford, 2003]

Available from me, Amazon or by order from your local bookstore.

Go to: <http://www.bruceelkin.com/simplicity-book.html>

- For Information on my personal and professional Life Coaching approach – please go to <http://www.BruceElkin.com>
- For my free Coaching Info Package and/or free 45-Minute Consultation please email me at [Bruce@BruceElkin.com](mailto:Bruce@BruceElkin.com).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Bruce Elkin is a Personal, Professional and Executive Life Coach.** He has 25 years experience working with individuals, professionals and organizations that are stuck, stalled, drifting without direction, or just stale and in need of renewal.

Although he lives in beautiful Victoria, BC, Canada, Bruce works with clients on 6 continents. **He helps them clarify what they truly care about—and then organize their lives, work and relationships so they show it.**

By helping them to clarify their thinking, he helps clients get unstuck, on track, and consistently moving toward the results that matter most to them. His approach starts with the skills clients already possess, and builds on them as he coaches them toward mastery—and creating the results that matter most to them.

Bruce is the author of **Simplicity and Success: Creating the Life You Long For**, and **Emotional Mastery: Manage Your Moods and Create What Matters—With Whatever Life Gives You**. And numerous articles on creating what matters most—in life and work.

He publishes the **Simply Success eNewsletter**. **Subscribe at:**

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**Endnotes:**

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- 29 Appendix A includes two forms that can help you practice the ABCs and DE's. One is designed to print out and write on. The other is for use on MS Word, on your computer. I find the second form particularly helpful for disputing nutty thoughts and beliefs. It allows me to write out self-defeating Bs, one at a time, in a left hand column. Then, beside each belief or thought is space to actively dispute them (D), using the techniques above.
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- 38 See the section on "Active Journaling" in Chapter 7: "Mental Paths to Mastery" in my ebook [Emotional Mastery: How To Manage Your Moods and Create What Matters With Whatever Life Gives You](http://www.bruceelkin.com/emotional-mastery.html). <http://www.bruceelkin.com/emotional-mastery.html>
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