Cultivating a Culture of Resilience in Your Organization: Practical Steps to Strengthen Your Team for the Long Haul

Presented By:

David Shearon
Thriving Lawyers Institute
Pewee Valley, KY

Stanley Johnson
U.S. Army Master Resilience School
Fort Jackson, SC

Nikki Johnson
U.S. Army Master Resilience School
Fort Jackson, SC

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Dave Shearon speaks, writes, and trains on the skills of thriving and resilience in the context of the unique challenges inherent in the practice of law. Dave's CLE programs provide research-based content from the field of Positive Psychology in a practical, usable format. They are fast-paced, interactive, and sprinkled with stories that help participants understand, remember, and apply the skills. Dave's approach has made him a top-rated and in-demand speaker. In addition to his work with lawyers, Dave has led teams that trained over 2,000 US Army Master Resilience Trainers, taught public school superintendents, principals and teachers. Dave is co-author of SMART Strengths: The Parent-Teacher-Coach Guide to Building Character, Resilience, and Relationships in Youth. Dave began his career practicing law in Nashville, TN and, for 24 years served as Executive Director of the Tennessee Commission on CLE. JD, University of Virginia (1979), Master of Applied Positive, Univ. Pennsylvania (2006).

Stanley Johnson
U.S. Army Master Resilience School
Fort Jackson, SC

Stan Johnson was born in Saint Petersburg, Florida. He joined the U.S. Army as a Combat Signal Repairman immediately after high school and completed Basic Combat Training and Advance Individual Training at Fort Sill, OK. Stan's previous assignments include Baumholder & Mannheim, Germany; Fort Lewis, WA; Camp Hovey, Korea; Fort Stewart, GA; Fort Bliss, TX; Schofield Barracks, Hawaii; and Fort Monroe, VA. He has served in every leadership position in the Communications field and retired in 2011 out of the TRADOC G-3/5/7 as the Initial Entry Training Sergeant Major (IET SGM), which at the time was responsible for heading up the Army’s new Resilience Program. Stan has received numerous awards and decorations to include the Legion of Merit and the Bronze Star Medal. A member of the prestigious Sergeant Audie Murphy Club, he has served in four combat tours/operations and has a wealth of knowledge and experience.

Stan holds a M.B.A with a Bachelor’s in Organizational Psychology. After receiving his training and certifications at the University of Pennsylvania, he is currently serving as an Assistant and Primary Instructor at the United States Army Master Resilience School where he teaches Levels 1 and 2 of the Master Resilience Course. The courses teach positive psychology, resilience and effective communication skills to Soldiers, family members and DA Civilians throughout the military.
Stan is the founder and owner of SKY3 (Start Knowing Yourself), a non-profit training and development company created to serve Veterans in Transitions (VITs), at-risk teens, and other organizations in Columbia, South Carolina and surrounding communities. He serves as a Master Trainer & Mentor providing training sessions on resilience skills aimed at improving communication skills, connections and coping skills within the Richland County School Districts; his training audiences include educators, administrators, students, and parents/care givers. Drawing from his experience as a Soldier and senior military leader, Stan has partnered with the Richland County Sheriff department’s Youth Division and local after-school programs where he teaches, coaches, and mentors teens how to build resilience, enhance performance and achieve academic success. He also volunteers and teaches resilience skills at the adult recovery center – Transitions; assisting adults in their transition from the streets into permanent housing. Stan currently resides in Blythewood, SC with his wife of 24 years and they have four children.

**Nikki Johnson**  
U.S. Army Master Resilience School  
Fort Jackson, SC

Nichele Nicole (Nikki) Johnson was born and raised in San Francisco, California. In January 1990, while attending Sacramento State College, she entered the United States Army (active duty) as part of the Transportation Corps. Nikki’s previous assignments include multiple state-side locations, two overseas assignments and three combat deployments. She has served in every leadership position as a Transporter and retired from the Army in 2010 at the most senior enlisted rank of Command Sergeant Major with over 20 years of military service. A decorated combat veteran, Nikki has received numerous awards and decorations, to include the Legion of Merit and the Bronze Service Medal. She holds both a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in Education with a minor in Psychology and after receiving several certifications in Applied Positive Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, she is currently serving as a level 4/Primary Instructor at the U.S. Army Master Resilience School at Fort Jackson.

With a passion for teaching and helping others to ‘be their best selves’ Nikki has served in this position for 7 years. She leads a team of both Military & Civilian instructors who, each year, train and educate over 900 Soldiers, D.A. Civilians and Military Family Members on resilience core competencies, resilience skills, and effective communication skills. She also provides training on key philosophies from the sports psychology discipline that underlie improved performance. For the past 4 years Nikki has also served as a Master Trainer & Mentor with the company SKY3 where she provides training sessions on resilience skills aimed at improving communication skills, connections and coping skills within the Richland County School Districts; the training audience includes educators, administrators, students and parents/care givers. Nikki currently resides in Blythewood, SC with her husband of 24 years, Stan Johnson, and they have four children.
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David N. Shearon, JD, MAPP
Prepared for ACLEA Mid-Year Meeting, San Antonio, TX
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These materials provide background and instructions for four resilience skills mentioned during the plenary session: “Hunt the Good Stuff,” “ATC,” “Thinking Traps,” “Put It In Perspective,” and “Active Constructive Responding.”
Hunt the Good Stuff (a/k/a “Right Spotting”)

The Army calls this skill “Hunt the Good Stuff,” but the skill has gone by many names. Originally, Martin Seligman called it “Three Blessings,” Dave Shearon calls it “Right Spotting” – a play on “Issue Spotting” that lawyers are taught in law school, with the suggestion that we are trained to see problems, but not strengths, or what has gone right.

Our natural tendency is to focus on the negative: threats, weaknesses, problems, risks, and worst-case scenarios. Those immersed in disputes on a daily basis may be even more prone to this tendency. However, multiple research streams indicate that human beings function best when they tip heavily to the positive side in their moment-to-moment, day in/day out emotional experiences. In fact, we seem to reach our best levels of wellbeing, resilience, growth, and relationships at positive to negative ratios of 3:1 or more.¹

In the first test of this particular resilience/wellbeing activity, Dr. Martin Seligman and a team of researchers at the University of Pennsylvania recruited volunteers through Penn’s research website (www.authentichappiness.org) to test several interventions designed to improve overall well-being.² One of these exercises asked participants to spend a few minutes at night just before going to bed recording three good things that happened that day and spending a few minutes reflecting on each one.

Participants doing variations of this exercise noticed the following benefits³ (which have since been confirmed in additional research⁴):

- increased happiness
- decreased depression
- increased moments of positive emotion, such as gratitude
- improved psychological capacities, such as hope and optimism
- improved health and physical function

The form on the next page is designed to you record good things that happen and guide your reflection on those good things in ways that research indicates may be particularly helpful. Feel free to print and copy this to make a Right Spotting Journal for your personal use.

Right Spotting Together

This skill can also be used with other people. Many practice it with family members, sometimes with variations such as putting a white board on the refrigerator that’s reserved for brief notes about good things. In an organizational setting, leaders can create times (the start of staff meetings, for example) to reflect as a group about things that are going right.

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¹ Fredrickson, B.L. (2001); Fredrickson, B.L. (2009).
³ Id.
Right Spotting Journal

Think of something that went right – something good that happened – since yesterday morning. Describe it in the first box below and write a sentence about it based on one of these prompts:

- Thinking broadly, this good thing was caused by...
- This good thing happened because I am...
- I can have similar good things in the future by...
- This good thing means...

Repeat for boxes 2 & 3 – a total of three good things in the last 24 hours!

Good Thing:

Reflection:

Good Thing:

Reflection:

Good Thing:

Reflection:
ATC  a/k/a Think-It-Through

ATC is a foundational cognitive skill in the MRT skill set. It is the direct basis for two other skills (“Thinking Traps” and “Detecting Icebergs”) and it is also used in Problem Solving and Assertive Communications. Out of what may be an excess of respect for the intellectual property rights of the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania (developers of the Army program), we will use a different name for the skill – “Think-It-Through.”

Think-It-Through has its origins in the work of Albert Ellis\(^5\) and, as taught here, is heavily influenced by the work of Karen Reivich.\(^6\) We often tell students (and others, even, sometimes, ourselves!) to “Think it through,” but do we teach them how to do this. Have we learned how? Are we experts?

**Emotions are driven by our thoughts.** Although we often act and talk as if (and sometimes may believe) that the events in the world – the “Its” – drive our emotions. “Because \_\_ \_ happened, I felt \_\_ \_ .”

In fact, however, a moment’s reflection (and the entire field of cognitive behavioral therapy) shows that it is not the “IT”- also known as an “activating event” or “AE” - that controls our emotions; rather, our emotions and reactions come from our thoughts. For example, imagine someone close to you (a spouse, sibling, or good friend) has been acting differently for a few weeks. They have seemed secretive and have often arranged to be apart from you at times when you would normally be together. You have started to doubt the relationship. You may feel anxious if you view their actions as a threat to your future well-being. You may be angry if you think they have violated your rights. Further, if someone asked you why you were feeling so, you would tell them about the other person’s behavior – you would point to the events out in the world – as the cause of your emotions. However, imagine that you suddenly discover that, in fact, they have been planning a surprise party for you with all your closest friends to celebrate some milestone or accomplishment. How quickly would the anxiety or anger drain away and be replaced by excitement, appreciation, and gratitude? For many of us, almost instantly! (If other emotions linger, it is because we are continuing to have thoughts that drive those emotions.) It is not the “ITs” – the activating events - that drives our emotions, but rather our thoughts (beliefs, judgments, evaluations, characterizations) about events.

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\(^6\) Reivich, K., & Shatté, A. (2002).
Activating Events come in all sizes, two flavors, and different shapes.

An “activating event” is anything in our awareness. Our thoughts about many, many AEs raise negligible emotional reactions and have little impact on our pursuit of our goals. However, any IT about which our thoughts generate a noticeable emotional reaction offers an opportunity for self-awareness and the possibility of improving outcomes by Think-IT-Through.

- AEs can be small, large, or in between (at least to an observer). Our brains can generate thoughts that drive large emotions or big reactions after seemingly trivial events.
- AEs can be “positive”-things we would like more of in our lives (notice that even wanting more is a thought!) or “negative” (things we would evaluate as undesirable).
- Finally, AEs can even be imaginary or remembered. As shown in Gabrielle Oettingen’s work on positive fantasies, we react to imagined events very much as if they were real, even to the point of relaxing and stopping pursuit of a desired outcome when we fantasize success without connecting back to current obstacles. Alternatively, on the “negative” side, we can experience traumatic events through imagination sufficiently to manifest Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder simply by hearing about and imagining the trauma of another. Medical personnel, lawyers, and other helping professionals face this challenge.

Our thoughts can be too rigid, inaccurate, or incomplete. We are more productive when our thoughts are flexible, accurate, and thorough.

Just as in the example of the surprise birthday party, the first thoughts our brain pops up about an “IT” may not be accurate and productive. Instead, they may send us into an unnecessary negative emotional spin or cause us to take actions that damage relationships or hinder achievement of our goals. Later on, we will study some of the most common and most damaging patterns of thinking. But first, we need to practice the skill of meta-cognition, thinking about our thinking, or, “Think-IT-Through.” The first step is to bring to mind some activating events on which to practice:

My Starter Think-IT-Through List

- Recent events – able to go back and re-live. As you go forward, do Think-IT-Through analysis as soon after the IT as possible.
- Vivid – some emotional impact
- Especially adversities, but include some successes and good things also

1. 
2. 
3. 

Use the Think-IT-Through form on the next page to guide your practice of this skill.
Think-It-Through

**It:** (Facts! Who, what, when, where. Get back in the moment.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What did you think? Beliefs, judgments, explanations, predictions (raw, verbatim)</th>
<th>Through: What did you feel? How did your body react? What did you do in the moment?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>4.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Were your thoughts/feelings/actions helping you get more of what you want? (Short-term, long-term, in all areas of your life)**

(This form may be copied by participants in ACLEA Mid-Year 2018 for personal use only.)
No Connections between “ITs” and “Thoughts”

“ITs” do not drive thoughts. Just because a person experiences a particular event does not mean that they will necessarily have a particular thought. In fact, it is quite common for people to have very different thoughts and, as a result, very different emotions and reactions, after simultaneously experiencing an event. Here’s a story from the author’s life that illustrates this point, and perhaps some others we have already covered:

During my senior year in high school, I won an appointment and was accepted into the United States Air Force Academy. On July 3 of the summer after I graduated, my parents dropped me off to begin my experience there, and the remainder of July and August were devoted to what amounted to “boot camp.” It was tough, and the worst day, for me, came while we were out in “Jack’s Valley,” living in tents and in the midst of the military induction ritual.

My worst day began the night before. We had “land navigation” where we were supposed to navigate a course using compass and map. For some reason, our first experience with this was at night – no daytime practice! I have no idea how my squad did. All I remember is scrambling up and down the steep Colorado landscape well past midnight trying to find our way out or back or something. Somehow, we all got back and finally got a few hours of sleep. However, reveille came early and I slogged out into the day short on sleep. And the hits just kept coming.

First was the Confidence Course, where our squad had to navigate up high towers and down long ropes to build confidence. A cadet on one obstacle quit moving while sliding down a rope and ultimately fell 15 feet or so to the ground, headfirst. Fortunately he was not seriously injured, but we did not know that at the time. It was my squad’s turn next.

On the way to lunch, an upperclassman noticed the scuffed toes of my boots from the night before and said, “Gross boots, Mr. Shearon. Gross.” I waited for the axe to fall, but he let the matter drop.

After lunch was “CBR” – chemical, biological, and radiological warfare – which began with a long, boring lecture in a hot tent and ended with us subjected to tear gas, first with gas masks, then without!.

Finally came the Assault (obstacle) Course where I was singled out in front of the entire unit (several hundred cadets) and screamed at for having “gross boots.” Then it was crawling under barbed wire; slogging through mud; and finally jumping, swinging, and climbing our way around the course while members of the Training Cadre screamed...
insults and “motivational” comments such as, “You’re the worst squad we’ve seen today!” After completing the course, we formed up into our squads, were screamed at some more, and marched back to the campground.

As my squad walked back into the tent, the thought that popped into my brain was, “That’s it. That was the worst day of the summer, probably of my whole Academy career. It’s easier from here.” I immediately felt calmer, more relaxed, and happier. My optimism came back and my confidence went up. Almost at the same moment, one of my squad mates (12 of us in this big tent) began screaming, cursing, and hitting his bed with his towel. His words made it clear he was thoroughly angry and ashamed of our performance at the Assault Course. He (loudly) expressed the opinion that we had embarrassed ourselves. We were both reflecting back on the events of the day, which we had experienced together, but we were having very different thoughts and, therefore, very different emotions and reactions.

**Consistent Think-IT-Through Connections**

Even though there are no necessary connections between an event and the thoughts the person experiencing it may have, there are extremely reliable connections between certain categories of thoughts (what the thought is about) and the family of emotions that will be triggered by those thoughts. In fact, these connections are so reliable that we take them for granted.

Recall the example at the start of this section involving one’s thoughts about the behavior of someone close might change upon learning that he or she was planning a surprise party. I included these two sentences:

“You may feel anxious if you view their actions as a threat to your future well-being. You may be angry if you think they have violated your rights.”

When we have thoughts that are about a threat, we will likely experience the emotion of anxiety. When we have thoughts about a violation of our rights, we will likely experience anger. These connections are so universal and so reliable, it is very unlikely you did anything other than simply nod and keep reading. (Unless, of course, you were imagining that you would have had a thought in a different category. For example, some might have a thought about losing trust in the other, rather than the other having violated their rights. In that case, thoughts of loss usually lead to the emotion of sadness and prompt a tendency to withdraw.)

By “category of thought”, we mean “what the thought is about.” So, a thought that is about offense or violation of rights will almost always lead to an emotion in the family of anger (“mad”, “aggravated”, “irritated”, “furious”, etc.). Obviously the intensity of the emotion will
depend on the exact nature of the thought. A thought that identifies a minor offense, e.g., “He was not as respectful as he could have been,” will likely generate a much weaker emotional response than a thought that evaluates the offense as more serious, such as, “That guy completely disrespected me! What a jerk!” So, the “category” or “type” of thought determines the emotion and reaction it will elicit. The following exercise will help make this clear, and will also emphasize that different people can have different thoughts about the same event.

Here are common Think-IT-Through connections:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Think (Your thoughts are about)</th>
<th>Through:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| An Offense or Violation of Rights | Feel: Anger  
Do: Aggression |
| Danger or Threat (cannot handle) | Feel: Fear, Anxiety  
Do: Agitation, Escape |
| Loss | Feel: Sad  
Do: Withdraw |
| Harming another (inappropriate) | Feel: Guilt  
Do: Apologize, Make amends |
| Failure to measure up (loss of standing) | Feel: Embarrassment  
Do: Hide |
| Receipt of gift (from another, the universe, or God) | Feel: Gratitude  
Do: Pay back or forward |
| Positive contribution; significant success | Feel: Pride  
Do: Share, plan |
| Positive future | Feel: Hope, energized  
Do: Pursue goal |
| Novelty (in safe environment) | Feel: Curiosity, interest  
Do: Attend, explore |
| Nonjudgmental focus on present | Feel: Calm, serene  
Do: Relax |

**Why Think-IT-Through?**

To learn Think-IT-Through, it is important to practice the skill on ordinary, not-particularly-emotional reactions to Activating Events. (An experience that arouses no emotion likely will
also not be one you remember enough to Think-It-Through.) With practice, you can learn to apply the skill to more emotionally charged situations. But, why? What’s the benefit?

**Clearer thinking.** Just by writing down the thoughts that your brain popped up in the moment, you get some distance from them and are able to think more clearly and more critically. When thoughts are bouncing around in our heads, they carry a power—they seem true—in ways they quickly lose when we write them down on paper. You may also find it easier to ask yourself whether there is another way to think about the event, once you write down the event, your thoughts, and your emotions and reactions. Sometimes, clearer thinking is easy to see. Other times, you may need some of the other skills such as “Avoid Thinking Traps” discussed below.

**Greater self-awareness.** When individuals first start practicing Think-It-Through, we often see them “miss” some of their thoughts entirely. They will write down a thought that they do not realize presumes a previous thought, but not write down the prior thought. For example, suppose you are in a fender-bender and the first thought you are aware of is “My insurance rates will skyrocket.” Notice that this thought presumes that the accident is your fault. So, the prior thought is “It’s my fault.” Many of us (especially lawyers) have a tendency to “blame me first.” Regular practice of Think-It-Through can help us become aware of this and start to question whether such an approach is a useful standard practice.

**Better in-the-moment reactions.** With practice, Think-It-Through becomes easy and fluid—to the point where, in many situations, you can do it in the moment. As you learn your patterns, you can start to notice those that are often working against you and catch them in the moment before you act in ways that work against your bigger goals.

**Better interactions with others.** A school superintendent in a system where I did two years of leadership training told me that this skill is the one that made the most difference for him. He said, “I use Think-It-Through all the time to try and understand how others might react to my actions. Even when I am just writing an email, I am much more aware of how it might be perceived by others.” Think-It-Through can also help us connect more with others when we are confused by their reactions. If someone seems angry, we can be fairly certain that they think their rights have been violated, and that can help start a conversation off in a better direction.
Avoid “Thinking Traps”

If our thoughts about an event drive our emotions and reactions, then thoughts that are inaccurate or incomplete may well drive actions that can backfire on us. In many cases, just slowing down to do a Think-It-Through analysis will give us enough distance from our thoughts to spot potential flaws. However, sometimes we need some special tools to help us inspect our thoughts more carefully. Cognitive psychologists have known for decades that most people are subject to a common set of potential flaws in our thinking. The Army MRT program emphasizes six such common flaws, known commonly as “Thinking Traps,” and provides tools for minimizing the damage they can cause. As it so happens, one of the primary ways to “get out” is by questioning the thought. For lawyers, think of it as “cross-examining oneself”!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thinking Trap</th>
<th>Get out of it by asking myself:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jumping to Conclusions:</strong> The belief, judgment, conclusion, or prediction is not supported by sufficient evidence. (In one sense, this is the broadest category of Thinking Traps and the rest are just specific examples.)</td>
<td>What evidence supports the thought? Treat the thought like the opinion of a hostile expert witness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mind Reading:</strong> The belief, judgment, conclusion, or prediction is about an internal thought or emotion of another person and is NOT based on that person’s statements. This trap, in a kind of reverse format, also involves expecting others to know (without being told) what our thoughts or emotions are.</td>
<td>Have I asked the person what he or she might be thinking? How do I know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have I expressed my feelings in a way that would be understandable and clear to a reasonable person not already inside my head?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Me, Me, Me:</strong> The pattern of believing that I am the primary cause of every adverse event. (This is common for lawyers!)</td>
<td>What external factors – other people, circumstances – could have contributed to this event?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Them, Them, Them:</strong> The pattern of believing that other people or circumstances are the primary cause of every adverse event.</td>
<td>How might I have contributed to this event? What role did I play?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Always, Always, Always:</strong> The pattern of seeing the causes of bad events as long lasting.</td>
<td>What can I do to limit the effect of this event? Could the cause of this event be temporary?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Everything, Everything, Everything:</strong> The pattern of seeing bad events as pervasive in their effect – spreading to many areas of life.</td>
<td>What specifically caused this particular event? What specific area of my life will be affected?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The “Toxic Duo” – Learned Helplessness and Depression:** The Army calls the last two “the Toxic Duo.” In combination, they can drive toward helplessness and depression. This is based on the work of Martin Seligman in “Learned Helplessness.” Basically, when subjected to uncontrollable negative events (e.g., a small electric shock) many research subjects (over 50% of all subjects) would develop “learned helplessness.” They would simply assume they have no control and would get to the point where they would not take preventative or palliative action in situations
where they DID have control. Based on the actions of clients, opponents, partners, judges, legislatures, etc., many lawyers can experience adverse events over which they have no control and can easily develop a “negative explanatory style” that habitually assigns permanent (Always) and pervasive (Everything) causes to any adversity. If coupled with a hyper-sensitized sense of personal responsibility (Me), this can easily become a thinking pattern that spirals into full-blown depression.

The Pattern Matters: Falling into one of these traps occasionally is probably just an inevitable part of living. But if practicing Think-It-Through and Avoid Thinking Traps helps you realize what your personal favorite Thinking Traps are, then you have the chance to develop a habit of noticing and questioning those types of thoughts and perhaps avoiding quite a number of unproductive emotional and behavioral responses to situations.
Put It In Perspective

This is another cognitive skill – one designed for those times when our minds run away with a “parade of horribles” that flood us with negative emotions (often anxiety) and keep us from functioning productively. The Army teaches one version of this skill and calls it “Put It In Perspective.” Here you have two approaches. The S.T.O.P. Technique is quick and easy. “Balance Your Thinking” is a more systematic, step-wise approach that is closer to the Army technique.

S.T.O.P. Technique

The first technique for making sure your thoughts are driving emotions and reactions that are likely to be productive is the S.T.O.P. technique.7


Take several deep, slow breaths. As you breathe, let your attention focus on your breath. In... Out... Notice the physical sensations of breathing, slowly. Deeply.

Observe the moment. The position of your body. Tension. Other sensations. Observe your thoughts. Notice as they arise, fade, and are replaced by new thoughts. If it is difficult to just observe your thoughts describe them, “I am having the thought....” Observe your emotions. Notice as they change – stronger, weaker, different. Name them, “I am feeling ______. Now I am feeling ________.”

Plan and Proceed. Make a plan to move forward, focused on achieving what you want in life, or a particular scenario, and putting this moment to good use toward that end. Retain your increased awareness and control as you act.

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7 This technique is widely taught in mindfulness workshops, especially those focused on stress reduction. See, e.g., Bob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein, A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook (Oakland, CA; New Harbinger Publications, 2010).
Balance Your Thinking

Occasionally, our thoughts and emotions can turn to wildly unrealistic and completely unproductive worst-case outcomes. A relatively ordinary event can trigger thinking that rapidly runs toward the “awfulest of awful.” You send an email with a misspelled word, and all of a sudden, in your mind, you have been fired, failed as a lawyer, and are working some dead-end job! This is catastrophic thinking. Some of us are real pros; others only occasionally indulge in this form of unproductive thinking. But most of us experience catastrophic thinking, especially when we are tired, when we are trying something new and are unsure of ourselves, or when something very important is at stake.

Catastrophic thinking often takes the form of a superficially coherent, “downward spiral”. Other forms of catastrophic thinking include “circling” (one or two or three repetitive thoughts just endlessly circling through the mind) and “scattershot” (random, unrelated thoughts of adverse events and situations).8

When this happens, it is often hard to use the basic Think It Through technique. The negative thoughts in our mind have such a pull that, when we try to think of more reasonable alternatives, we just get sucked back in to the darkest alternatives. Meanwhile, strong emotions of anxiety are depleting our energy and distracting our attention from any form of productive action. We’re stuck.

To get unstuck, we need a technique that drains the power of the catastrophic thoughts, boosts us toward more practical thinking with a shot of positive emotions, and lets us come up with what is really likely to happen and a plan for moving forward. Here’s the tool:

To Add This Skill to Your Toolkit:

- Remember times you have catastrophized and complete a “Balance Your Thinking” worksheet.
- Continue to practice when needed.
- Try teaching the skill to someone else. Teaching is a great way to increase personal mastery.

8 The terms “downward spiral,” “circling,” and “scattershot” evolved during the development and initial rollout of the Army’s Military Resilience Trainer Training Program. “Balance Your Thinking” is a name for this skill developed by Paula Davis-Laack.
**BALANCE YOUR THINKING**

**Goal:** Lower your anxiety so you can take purposeful action, which is especially useful when you’re catastrophizing.

**Instructions:**

**STEP 1:** Describe the Stress Producing Event in a factual way

**STEP 2:** List the worst case scenario (write until you’ve captured the entire story your brain is telling)

**STEP 3:** Create an equally unlikely best case scenario (the goal is to generate a jolt of positive emotion)

**STEP 4:** Identify the most likely outcomes (*include emotions too*)

**STEP 5:** Develop a plan to deal with the most likely outcomes (including steps to address the emotions you identified in Step 4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worst Case Scenario</th>
<th>Best Case Scenario</th>
<th>Most Likely Outcome</th>
<th>My Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(Based on work by Drs. Aaron Beck, Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatte)
Active Constructive Responding

Based on the work of Shelly Gable, Harry Reis, and others, it turns out that a critical question in relationships is, “Will you be there for me when things go right?” Think about it – do you really want to keep spending time with someone who only focuses on you when you’ve screwed up or things are going badly for you, but doesn’t show much interest when something good happens for you? Active constructive responding predicts relationship growth.

Will you be there when things go wrong?

It turns out that the perception, the “feeling” (emotion-laden belief) that someone close to you will be there when things go wrong is positive, but the reality of actually having them be there for you is much more complex. The feeling that someone will be there for you (“perceived support”) is uniformly related to good outcomes such as lower risk of depression in stressful times, better adjustment to disease, and reduced heart-rate and blood pressure when facing a stressful task. Moreover, it turns out that how someone responds to our good news has more impact on our feeling that the person will be there for us when times are tough than actual experiences of receiving support! In the context of learning (whether learning as a student, or learning to be a better teacher and leader), just bringing to mind a close, responsive relationship helps the learner engage better with challenges such as learning from failure and minimizes self-handicapping when faced with potentially meaningful challenges.

Active Constructive Responding (ACR)

ACR means paying attention and showing engagement and responsiveness in an authentic way when someone shares good news, and responding in ways that help them “re-live” the event. Helping them “re-live” is not the same as congratulating or praising them; it is more like, “tell me more about that.” This type of responding correlates with greater closeness in the relationship over time, fewer conflicts, and greater satisfaction with the relationship.

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10 Id.
**Things that make ACR difficult:**

- Safety issue
  - Safety trumps
- Downside (but not safety)
  - Two conversations

**How can your Signature Character Strengths help you stay in the ACR box?**

**How good are you at ACR?**

**What percentage of the time do you practice ACR when those closest and most important to you share good news?**
References


Fredrickson, B.L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology, Am. Psychol. 56(3), 218-226.


