



Realistic Thinking



Realistic Thinking is a key component of Resilience. It requires that your assumptions and beliefs about life don't interfere with your ability to accurately see the world. Said another way, realistic thinking allows you to see the world clearly, without distortion.

Think of your thoughts as a lens through which you view the world — like glasses or a telescope. If the lens is clear, you accurately see what is actually in front of you. If the lens is cracked, broken, colored, or otherwise distorted you see the world in a distorted fashion. If you understand that the lens is distorted you can compensate for the distortion by reminding yourself that the world doesn't actually look the way it appears through the lens.

Distortions in our thinking interfere with our ability to respond to the world as it is. The fewer distortions we have, the better we can communicate, get along with others, and solve problems; and the happier we will be in general. It's difficult to see our own distortions and it's much easier to see the distorted thinking of others. Some of the most upsetting interpersonal conflicts occur when we (with the best of intentions) attempt to point out the distorted thinking of another person.

"Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view which they take of them." --Epictetus

You Are Not Your Thoughts: Don't Believe Everything You Think

Resilience Skill: Learn to observe your thoughts

One of the primary thought distortions is to believe that all of our thoughts reflect reality and that we should therefore believe everything we think. Remember, you are not your mind or your thoughts. You are separate.

Separate Yourself from Your Thoughts

One of the most powerful strategies for keeping the lens of your thinking free of distortions is the practice of separating yourself from your thoughts. You do this by learning to observe your thoughts as something outside of your true self, much like watching a leaf float by on a stream. At first this might seem like a strange thing to do because most of us believe that we are our thoughts. We take our thinking much too seriously, believing that if we think something, it must be true. But the real truth is, you are not your thoughts. As a matter of fact, if you sit quietly, close your eyes, and simply watch your thoughts you will notice an endless stream of chatter, most of which is not particularly interesting or important. Some people call this "Monkey Mind." It is important to realize that you can have thoughts that are just thoughts. Some are funny, some are scary, some are nonsense, and a few are useful. As you recognize many of your thoughts as just noise which don't always have to be taken seriously, it will be easier for you to simply observe your thoughts as you think them, without feeling like you have to believe or take them seriously. You are taking upsetting thoughts too seriously when you try to talk back to them or distract yourself, or try to force them from your mind, or inappropriately avoid a situation because of them. It is not always necessary to talk back to or challenge thoughts that cause you distress; just recognize them for the meaningless noise that they are.



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Catching “What if...”

Resilience Skill: Understand Catastrophic Thinking

Catastrophic thinking is the mistaken belief that bad or catastrophic events are likely to happen when the actual likelihood of the catastrophic event is extremely low. It is a thought error that has a negative impact on resilience because it causes people to focus their energy and coping efforts on something that isn't real. This kind of thinking almost always has a “What if?” starting the thought. Here are some examples:

WHAT IF	
• when I'm having this tightness in my chest...	I'm having a heart attack? (and I die).
• when I'm asked a question in class...	I say something stupid? (and I'm rejected)
• when my daughter's waiting for the school bus...	she gets kidnapped? (and I never see her again)
• when I touch the door going into the Mall...	I get contaminated by germs (and I get sick/die)

As you can see from the examples, while “What if...?” looks and feels like a question, a catastrophic “what-if” thought is really a statement and a prediction of a negative outcome. This outcome can be something associated with dying or being completely humiliated and rejected or it can sometimes be a less serious outcome. In either case, however, considering how to cope with “what if?” is a waste of time, just like standing in front of a fun house mirror that makes you look fat and considering what kind of diet you should begin.

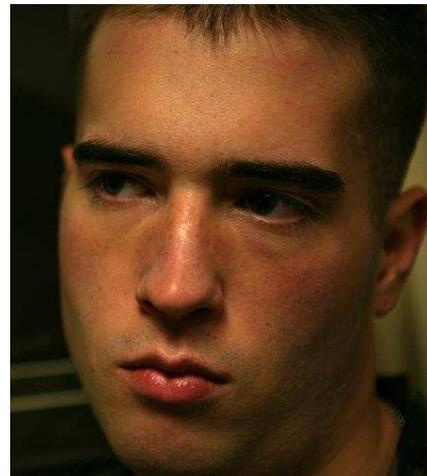
A Solution

When you are thinking this way you assume that you are viewing the world clearly. You are not aware that your lens is distorted.

How do you evaluate for yourself whether this is realistic thinking or not? The best way to determine whether your thinking is allowing you to see an accurate version of events is to ask yourself, “Under similar circumstances in the past, *what has actually happened in my personal experience?*”

Not what *could* have happened, what *might* have happened, or what *almost* happened, but what **actually** happened? This question becomes somewhat confusing for military personnel

who have been in a combat zone because what actually happened in combat was catastrophic. Once home, however, it's necessary to make a radical shift in the appraisal of what actually happens. At home, catastrophic events have a very low probability of occurring.



When you begin to pay attention to what actually does happen in everyday life away from a combat zone, you'll almost always find that the answer is “nothing or nothing too serious.”



Realistic Thinking

Do I Mistake Possible for Probable?

Resilience Skill: Increase realistic thinking by distinguishing between possible and probable

Another significant thought distortion that interferes with realistic thinking is to *fail to distinguish what is possible from what is probable* (or likely). This often sounds like, “Well, it’s possible that X or Y might happen” and is reinforced by listening to others make the same mistake. It’s also a strategy often used in media interviews to get the attention of an audience. How often have you heard a reporter ask breathlessly, “is it possible that X or Y bad thing could happen?” In a combat situation, it’s important to be extra vigilant, and it may be important to pay attention not only to what is likely to happen but what is possible, because it’s difficult to gauge the likelihood of catastrophic events. In non-combat environments, you have a lot more experience with what is likely or not likely to happen. The challenge becomes shifting your thought process. Consider the following examples:

- If you were to buy a lottery ticket, is it possible you could win the lottery?
 - ◊ Because it’s possible that you could win the lottery, should you act on that possibility and make a decision that actually affects your life? Should you quit your job for example?
- If you were to eat a piece of steak, is it possible you could choke on it and die?
 - ◊ Because it’s possible to choke on a piece of steak and die, should you act on that possibility and make a decision that actually affects your life? Should you avoid ever eating steak again for the rest of your life?

Most of the time people engage in realistic thinking. They understand that anything is possible. Since this is true, there is little need to consider what is possible when making a decision. Realistic thinking, which is part of resilience, allows you to ignore what is possible and focus only on what is probable or likely to happen in life.

The Language of Powerlessness

Resilience Skill: Increase sense of personal control over life

The language you use is a direct reflection of how you see the world. When you see yourself as powerless, as a pawn on the chess board of life being moved around against your will, your choice of language will reflect that sense of yourself. Look at how your language can reflect your sense of hopelessness, helplessness, and powerlessness.

- “My sisters are always **putting me in the middle.**”
- “My husband **manipulates** me into feeling guilty when we discuss my past.”
- “I am constantly **forced into** sticking up for my brother.”
- “She really **made me** mad when she said that.”
- “I’m really getting tired of **being pushed** around.”
- “I am constantly being **sucked into** these arguments.”



Realistic Thinking

The Language of Powerlessness (cont.)

If you look carefully, you'll find that every one of these phrases suggests the presence of an outside force acting on you, a force over which you have no control. This is an example of internal stimuli (your own thinking) magnifying a sense of helplessness. As you examine these phrases, ask yourself, "What is this *power* that is exerting this force on me?" A close look will show you that there are no powers forcing you to do things. Changing your thinking so that you can reclaim your own sense of personal power requires that you change your language. Changing the way we talk helps to change how we think.

The Language of Invitation: The Solution is to Understand Each Situation as an Invitation.

If you examine each phrase in the language of powerlessness, you'll find that with a small change in the wording you can turn each situation into an **invitation**, a simple request that you comply with whatever is being asked of you. This is called **the Language of Invitation**. When you do this you will find that your sense of powerlessness or victimization begins to change. Each of the situations described above can be turned into an invitation — someone is inviting you to "be put in the middle" or to "go on a guilt trip." If you remind yourself that these are simply **invitations** to go somewhere you don't want to go, it becomes immediately obvious that **you can refuse the invitation!** If you respond with a simple "NO THANK YOU" it will become clear that the other person has no power, other than to issue the invitation again, perhaps a little more loudly or insistently, but it still remains only an invitation. This keeps you from giving your power away and allows you to **choose** what you will do in each situation.

Many of our interactions are a series of invitations we give to one another. As with any invitation, we can Accept or Decline.

Listen to how it sounds when you use the concept of invitation:

- "She really **made me** mad when she said that."
(*"She invited me to get angry by saying that."*)
- "I'm really getting tired of **being pushed** around."
(*"I'm regularly being invited to do things I don't want to do."*)
- "I am constantly being **sucked into** these arguments."
(*"I'm constantly being invited to argue with him/her/them."*)



The Language of Invitation reflects reality much more accurately. When you understand this you will no longer view the world through a distorted lens, creating the illusion that there is a power *forcing* you to do anything or go anywhere. There are only invitations. And of course the concept of invitation requires that you take responsibility for the choices you make.