

TEAM WELLNESS SERIES

PART 4 OF 5 - BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH MENTAL TRAINING

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When we encounter most stressful situations our brain processes them quickly like a computer. This processing can be so automatic and unconscious that you do not even notice it. We also have a tendency like radar to notice “negative or threatening” things more easily than positive things. Unfortunately, many of us learn to process stressful events in a way that actually magnifies our stress. What could be neutral becomes worrisome and stressful. What typically would create some distress now creates a much more intense reaction.

In addition to being instinctively wired for certain stress reactions, some specific beliefs or values are also learned from our parents, teachers, peers, and religious authorities, and can act as *magnifiers* of stress to some degree in just about all of us. Fortunately, we can change how we *look at, perceive, or interpret* situations so that we do not overreact to stressful events. Rather than magnify our stress, we can learn to *filter* out some of its negative effects.

We can separate these so-called mental factors that magnify stress into two categories: mental habits and specific beliefs.

Four mental habits are very common in our culture. First, you might **exaggerate** things out of proportion and make things seem dramatically worse than they really are. If so, you often see situations deteriorating or leading to tragic conclusions. A second mental habit is where you tend to see things in rigid ways. Do you think in an **all or none** fashion? If so, you would see things in black and white and have a hard time seeing the gray in between. Your language might reflect this. Words like “never”, “always”, “everyone”, “no one”, and “impossible” are frequently heard. A third common mental habit is when we have a strong tendency to **focus on the negative** and tend to ignore the positive. Here, your attention is likely to focus on what is “wrong”, “bad”, “terrible”, etc. You can easily spot flaws in people, places, and things. A final mental habit is having **excessive expectations** of yourself and/or others. Thoughts such as “I must” or “you should” frequently will run through your mind and your vocabulary. If these expectations are not realistic, you are likely to be disappointed in yourself and others.

These mental habits are like any other habits in that they are hard to break unless we notice them and are motivated to change them. However, even when we want to change these **mental habits**, it will take effort on your part to notice them and change them by challenging those thoughts.

In addition to learning what some of your **mental habits** are, you want to increase your awareness of whether you are magnifying your stressors by examining your **specific beliefs** and attitudes. We all are likely to have some strong beliefs that can cause us additional distress. Below are just a few common beliefs that are likely to magnify stress. See if you identify with some of these troublesome beliefs.

I must have love and approval of everyone who I think is important to me.

I must be thoroughly competent at everything I do.

The world should be fair.

These beliefs which can be unconscious are quite common, but maintaining them will increase your stress. As such, they are major culprits in causing you more stress than you need to experience at any given time. These beliefs are magnifier of stress, and it would be to your benefit to pay attention to them and try to modify those beliefs. Here are some quick examples of more healthy thoughts to counter any of the stressful beliefs above.

Instead of: *I must have love and approval...*

More rational thoughts would be: *I wish I could be loved and approved by _____, and it really hurts that I am not able to get that, but I can survive this. This is not a life or death situation.*

Instead of: *I must be thoroughly competent at everything I do.*

More rational thoughts would be: *I really do try to do the best I can at whatever I do. If I am not perfect, or even if I fail, I will not like it, but I will be okay because this is how we learn to improve. I am human and none of us are perfect. I can accept my imperfections.*

Instead of: *The world should be fair.*

More rational thoughts would be: *I wish the world was fair, but I cannot control everything that happens in my life. Bad things do happen to good people. It is still upsetting when these things happen to me. My challenge is to get past the “unfairness” and not let this interfere with other aspects of my life.*

As stated above, you can buffer yourself from some stress by modifying any stress-magnifying habits or unrealistic beliefs. Fortunately, this can be done by learning to challenge these reactions and to talk to yourself in a way that helps break any mental habits or beliefs that are increasing your stress. These **strategies**, which will mentally diffuse much of the unwanted stress you encounter are presented in blogs on our website: **iCopeWithStress.com**.