



CHALLENGING YOUR THOUGHTS AND BELIEFS

*"If you don't change your beliefs, your life will be like this forever. Is that good news?"
—W. Somerset Maugham*

OVERVIEW

Teachers use a list of questions to evaluate and possibly change their thoughts, beliefs, and emotions after a stressful experience in order to foster a more positive response in the future.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- After you experience an event that triggers [difficult emotions](#)
- At the end of an emotionally challenging day or week at school—or at a time when you experience confusion or tension
- Any time throughout the school year; however, repeatedly using this practice at the beginning of the school year may help you to better navigate your thoughts and emotions throughout the year.

TIME REQUIRED

- 10-15 minutes

LEVEL

- Adult

MATERIALS

- Writing Materials
- Optional: [pdf of questions](#)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

You will:

- Evaluate, challenge, and possibly change your thoughts, beliefs, and emotions about a challenging situation

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- If using this practice in a staff meeting or during a professional development session, be sure to try it out yourself first.

INSTRUCTIONS

Disclaimer: Although individual questions in this practice may be useful cues for your students, this is a practice for adults and has been used primarily for therapeutic purposes. We do not encourage educators to use this practice, in its entirety, with groups of students. (If you suspect a student is in need of emotional support, consider consulting with your school mental health professional.)

This practice should not replace counseling services. If you are struggling with thoughts or feelings that are beyond the scope of this exercise, consider consulting with a mental health professional.

PREPARING FOR THE PRACTICE

- If possible, make time for this practice soon after a difficult event—or shortly after you experience tension. (Sometimes it's easiest to wait until after school or to even carve out a regular weekly time for a "Challenging Your Thoughts" reflection.) Find a space where you can spend 5-15 minutes of uninterrupted time — for example, your planning period at school, your office, or your bedroom at home.
- Be kind and compassionate with yourself as you mentally prepare to revisit an unpleasant event or thought that has challenged you.

- As you reflect on this experience that has been bothering you, remember that there are other people in the world who share your emotional state in that moment. You are not alone in feeling sad or angry or fearful.
- Take a few deep breaths before you settle down to write.
- Although you will be focusing on challenging your thoughts, be gentle with yourself if you notice bodily sensations and emotions as you write.
- If you prefer, consider the option of sharing this experience with a trusted friend or colleague.
- Write down responses to each of the following questions. Click [here](#) for a sample response and click [here](#) for a downloadable version of the questions.

NAMING THE EVENT, THOUGHT, AND FEELING

- Identify the stressful event here. What happened?

- What thoughts am I having? What am I imagining?

- How much do I believe it? (Rate 0-100) ____

- What does this thought make me feel?

- How strong is this feeling? (Rate 1-100) ____

QUESTIONING THE THOUGHT

- What evidence do I have that this is true or accurate?

- What evidence do I have that this is not true or, at least, not completely true?

- Is there another way to look at this? If so, what is it?

- What's the worst thing that could happen? Would I still be able to live through it?

- What's the best thing that could happen?

- What will most likely happen?

- What might happen if I keep repeating this thought in my head?

- What might happen if I changed my thinking about this?

- What might I tell my friend if this happened to her or to him?

MOVING FORWARD

- How much do I still believe the negative thought now? (Rate from 0-100) ____
- How strongly do I feel the negative emotion now? (Rate from 0-100) ____
- What should I do for myself now? ([This article](#) features a list of coping strategies.)

- After going through this process, is there any other action I might choose to take now?

EXTENSIONS

- Review [this article](#) identifying a series of irrational thinking patterns known as cognitive distortions. Can you identify any of your typical thinking patterns based on these examples (e.g, personalizing—“This is all my fault”; catastrophizing—“This is absolutely terrible.”)
- As you practice challenging your thoughts with these questions, do you observe changes in your behavior at work? At home?
- Consider repeating this practice 1-3 times a week for several weeks in a row. Can you identify subtle differences in your thoughts or emotions over time?

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- After completing the practice, do you notice if the experience changed how you felt or what you believed to be true about a situation?
- If you did this practice with a group of staff members, how did people respond to it? Was it helpful, clarifying, frustrating, or something else?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

This adapted practice is a form of *cognitive reappraisal*, an emotion regulation strategy that focuses on changing your interpretation of a situation or event. Studies have found [cognitive reappraisal](#) to be effective in lessening emotional and physical feelings of anxiety, along with [reducing depression](#) after stressful experiences.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Researchers tell us that our [thoughts, emotions, and behaviors](#) are interconnected. By regularly questioning your thinking in a structured way, you can begin to shift your perspective, navigate strong emotions, and ultimately respond more thoughtfully to your students and colleagues.

For example, if a student yells at a teacher in class, the teacher might initially think, “This is so awful; it feels terrible to be yelled at in front of all the kids. What did I do to deserve this?” If the teacher is able to pause and re-assess the situation, he can begin to adjust his thinking: “That was not pleasant, and it’s likely that this student is having a really rough time right now. It wasn’t personal.” With this revised perspective, he is less likely to react angrily, and more likely to help this student find more constructive outlets for her own anger.

SOURCE

The questions featured in this practice are drawn from a variety of sources. See “The Research Behind It.”