



The Relationship Between Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours

People often believe that the feelings and emotions they experience are determined by external events, situations and the behaviour of others. For example, we may hear ourselves say, "My boss made me so nervous", "My partner made me so angry", "This trip down south made me feel so relaxed", or "I'm depressed because I didn't get the job I wanted". The assumption underlying these statements is that someone or something else other than ourselves was directly determining the feelings we experienced.

We often come to these conclusions automatically without asking ourselves if this assumption is true. However, if we stop to analyse the process that links an external situation to our emotional responses, we will find that there is a step in between.

How our thoughts influence our reactions (feelings and behaviours)

What really makes us feel and respond the way we do is often not the situation or the words and actions of another person, but how we perceive that situation or that person's actions. It is how we see something or someone and what we think about it or them that really influences how we feel and subsequently how we respond. It is our thoughts and feelings about an event that significantly influences our emotions and actions.

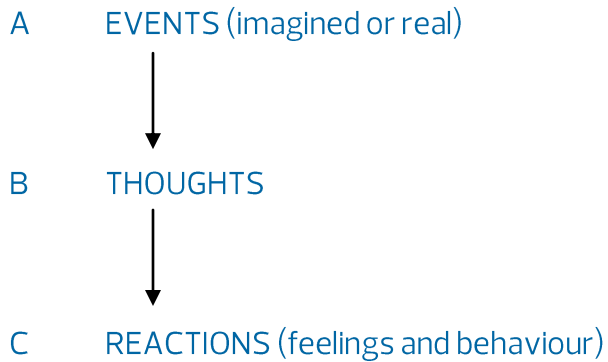
Here's an example. Imagine that you are standing up on a bus and someone bumps into you from behind resulting in you plunging into the lap of an unsuspecting passenger. Your immediate reaction may be one of anger provoked by thoughts such as:

"What a fool. He should be more careful. I shouldn't have to put up with this."

The reality of that moment, as you see it, is that you have been mistreated. If you then discover that the person who bumped you is blind, your feelings may alter. The situation is the same, but your perceptions and interpretations have changed. Your

attitude towards blind people will probably allow you to be more sympathetic and reduce your anger at being pushed.

This process can be conceptualised as the ABC of thinking, feeling and behaviour and can be illustrated by the following diagram:



A **Events** are situations which you react to, such as being criticised by your partner, not finding what you are looking for, being asked by your boss to do extra work, or meeting an old friend.

Imagined events can lead to the same reactions as real events. If you believe something to be true, you will react as though it were true. Your thoughts alone will trigger emotional and physical reactions just as if the event had really occurred.

The following is an example of this. Steven's wife did not call to say that she would be late home. As time passed the thought came to him that she could be having an affair. Once this suspicion took hold of him, he began to believe that it was true. He felt hurt, rejected and angry and even started planning in his mind how he was going to retaliate. When his wife arrived home, she told him how she had been in a traffic jam caused by a serious car accident. Steven's wife could not understand why he was so upset and angry with her for being late.

B **Thoughts** are based on personal values and beliefs that you have learnt over time. To become more aware of the meanings you give to events you need to pay close attention to your thinking at the time you became upset. By noticing what you are saying to yourself, you will be able to identify particular beliefs that cause unhelpful reactions.

C **Reactions** are your responses to your thoughts and consist of your feelings and behaviour.

- **Feelings** are fundamental to our existence as human beings. Feelings are not spontaneous, but arise as a result of the personal meanings given to our experiences. For example, two salesmen waiting for an important client who is late for a business lunch, react according to their individual interpretations. One sees the client's lateness as a sign of disinterest and becomes anxious,

thinking he will lose the sale. The other stays relaxed, assuming that the client is merely busy and has been inadvertently delayed.

We often give different labels to feelings depending on their strength. When feelings become intense, it is more difficult, if not impossible, to stay in control of a situation. You may react in ways you later regret.

It is often difficult to know exactly what we are feeling, and sometimes it can also be difficult to put it into words. The list below contains words that describe feelings:

Tense	Enraged	Frightened	Cheerful
Annoyed	Happy	Panicky	Euphoric
Unhappy	Exhilarated	Frustrated	Mad
Calm	Keyed-up	Scared	
Uneasy			
Anxious	Irritated	Flat	Sad
Depressed	Joyful	Tired	Discouraged
Angry	Excited	Nervous	Jealous

- **Behaviour**, too, is affected by how events are interpreted. The anxiety experienced by the salesman may cause him to behave less confidently towards his client. Alternatively, he may behave more aggressively to ensure that the sale is made.

Automatic thoughts

Just as we are not always conscious of the way we walk or how we drive a car, we are often not aware of our thinking. Some of our thinking is so habitual that it is automatic, and just like driving, when things are automatic, we might not be conscious of them. All of the time, our brains are turning over thoughts and ideas. However, we are not consciously aware of most of them because it happens relatively fast and we are not accustomed to slowing them down. Our automatic thoughts, however, play an important role in our emotional well-being.

There are three kinds of automatic thoughts:

Neutral thoughts, e.g. "I think I will buy some bread today".

Positive thoughts, e.g. "This is something I can do really well".

Negative thoughts, e.g. "I often find it hard to concentrate – I must be really stupid".

Automatic thoughts often reflect worries and concerns, however, they can be about anything at all, anything we have ever seen, heard or learned. In addition, it can be anything we know about from any source at all. Obviously though, negative automatic thoughts are the ones that cause us emotional distress.