Lesson 7: Managing emotions in difficult conversations

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Throughout the course of this program, we've encountered a recurring theme: Our elephant (automatic thinking) has enormous influence over our judgment and decision-making. It often gets us into trouble by leading us down the wrong path and blinding us to other ways of seeing things.

It turns out that our elephant plays another role in making difficult conversations even more challenging. It can derail our discussions by causing us to lose control of our emotions.

But not to worry! In this lesson, we'll teach you an extremely valuable psychological skill to help you gain more control over your emotions. This skill will increase your personal well-being, improve your relationships, and help you navigate difficult conversations.

By the end of this lesson you'll have the tools to:
- Recognize when your elephant is leading you into trouble
- Master your emotions in difficult conversations
- Navigate challenging conversations more successfully

Let's begin by thinking through a scenario...

Let's do it!

Imagine your teacher tells you that she'd like to meet with you one-on-one at the end of the day, but she doesn't give you any more information about why she requested the meeting.

Immediately, your mind begins to race. You start jumping to the worst conclusions. You think to yourself, "I must've failed the last test! Why else would she want to meet with me?"

For the rest of the day, you're consumed with negative thoughts. You start thinking to yourself, "This grade will drag down my entire GPA and destroy my future career prospects. I don't really deserve to pass this course. They probably made a mistake by letting me take this course."

In this situation, how do you think you'd be feeling?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxious and worried</th>
<th>Excited and optimistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That's understandable, considering all those negative thoughts you had!</td>
<td>That's unusual! Most people say that all these negative thoughts would leave them feeling anxious and worried.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, your meeting arrives...

Your teacher beckons you into her office and says, "Hi [learner's name], I wanted to let you know that you got a perfect score on the latest test! You got every question and every extra credit question correct! In all of my years teaching this class, no one has ever done that before!"

The fears and concerns you had throughout the day suddenly melt away!

Now, imagine we went back in time to earlier in the day when your teacher first told you she wanted to meet with you.

What if, instead of assuming you had failed your test, you thought about how much work you had put into preparing and you asked yourself, "Maybe I aced my test?"

In this situation, how do you think you'd be feeling?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anxious and worried</th>
<th>Excited and optimistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That's unusual! Most people share that they'd probably be feeling excited and optimistic if they thought they might hear some good news.</td>
<td>That makes sense!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Isn't that interesting? The situation is exactly the same in both cases: Your teacher told you she wanted to meet with you, but didn't give you any context. The only thing that differed were your thoughts.

This leads us to two important insights:

1. There's more than one way that people can interpret a situation
2. The way we interpret a situation will shape how we feel

Now you might be thinking, "What does this have to do with difficult conversations?"

What's the connection?

When we have conversations about issues we care a lot about, our emotions — and the emotions of our conversation partner — are often running high.
We can be so overwhelmed with anger, frustration, or indignation that it feels like our blood is boiling. In this state, it often feels as though we have no control over how we respond. We sometimes end up saying and doing things that damage our relationships.

Now, this doesn't mean our emotions are bad. In fact, emotions often provide important signals that we should pay attention to. They're also responsible for all of the joy and positivity we experience.

You can think of our emotions as being like a flashlight. They can provide valuable illumination in the dark. But when they shine directly in our eyes, the intensity can be blinding, making it harder for us to make sense of what's right in front of us.

Can you think of a time when you were so blinded by emotion that you couldn't think straight?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good for you — that's very unusual!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many people can recall an occasion where their emotions were so intense that it felt like their brain was hijacked by feelings, and their reason was being held hostage.

There's a biological reason why this happens to so many of us, especially when we find ourselves in a conflict or disagreement with another person.

When our brain senses that we're at odds with someone, it can activate our body's "fight or flight" response, which prepares us to flee or defend ourselves against predators.

This sends a surge of adrenaline through our bodies and deprives our brain of the resources it needs for controlled thinking (our rider).

In these moments, our brain is basically all elephant: It's practically impossible to use any careful reasoning.

That's...not good

No kidding. At this point, our elephant usually leads us down one of two paths:

- **Shutting down**: We go into silence and refuse to open up any further
- **Lashing out**: We attack others with explosions of intense emotion
Neither of these are good options. Shutting down means we won't make progress towards reconciling our differences. Lashing out can permanently damage our relationships.

But it turns out that there's another way for us to handle these moments where our emotions start to feel overpowering. We can gain control over our elephant, instead of allowing it to control us.

**How do I do that?**

**The hidden intermediate step**

There's a step between what happens in our lives and how we feel about it.

![Events, Interpretation, Feelings]

It often happens so quickly and subtly that we don't even notice it. But it makes a huge difference in how we feel and act towards other people — especially when we're having a really difficult conversation.

The hidden intermediate step is that our brain creates an automatic interpretation of what we experienced.

**What do you mean?**

In response to events, our elephant creates automatic thoughts, which present an interpretation of what happened. (You may experience these thoughts as part of an ongoing "inner monologue," spoken by a voice inside your own head.)

Our automatic thoughts can contain all sorts of details we've invented, in order to tell ourselves a cohesive story about our experiences.

For example, we may automatically assume the motives behind someone's behavior. We also may assign judgments about whether those motives were good or bad. Essentially, we can judge people's character based on a narrative we've imagined!

The interpretations that we tell ourselves determine how we feel about what's going on. This leads us to a life-changing insight that's at the core of this lesson...
What's the insight?

The way we interpret events, rather than the events themselves, determines how we feel.

This insight has been the bedrock of many branches of ancient wisdom, from both the East and West.

More than 2,500 years ago, Buddha said:

"What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind."

A few hundred years later, the Greek philosopher Epictetus agreed:

"What really frightens and dismays us is not external events themselves, but the way in which we think about them. It is not things that disturb us, but our interpretation of their significance."

Does this ancient wisdom still apply today?

The thoughts, feelings, actions cycle

Absolutely! In fact, the idea that we react to our interpretations of events, rather than those events themselves, has been validated extensively by contemporary psychology and neuroscience.

The psychiatrist Aaron Beck transformed this ancient insight into one of the most effective, evidence-backed forms of psychotherapy: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).

Beck demonstrated how our feelings are shaped by our thoughts, in what he called the thoughts, feelings, actions cycle:

- When we experience an event in the world, we generate automatic thoughts about the event. For example, your teacher's request to meet with you could spark the thought: "I must've failed the last test!"
- These thoughts, in turn, lead us to particular feelings about the event. Thinking that you must have done poorly on your last test could make you feel anxious and worried.
- Our feelings then inform our actions. While you're in an anxious state, you might pay less attention to your work and be less friendly to others.
- Then our actions cause new experiences, which prompt new automatic thoughts...
This self-perpetuating cycle can get us stuck in a rut, repeating the same unproductive pattern of thoughts, feelings, and actions over and over again.

**So what can I do about this?**

By taking control of our interpretations, we can gain control over our feelings and actions and disrupt the cycle!

With intentional practice, we can train ourselves to take control of our interpretations until it becomes an automatic habit! This can make us happier, sharpen our thinking, and improve our relationships.

We can even do this in the heat of difficult conversations — which can help us navigate them more successfully.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To summarize, how do our automatic thoughts influence the way we feel and act during difficult conversations?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Our automatic thoughts</strong> can lead us to feel and act in a particular way. But we can intervene by changing our interpretations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Because these thoughts</strong> are automatic, there's nothing we can do to counteract how they make us feel and behave</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exactly! Not quite!

We can’t stop ourselves from having automatic interpretations (our elephant). But we can use controlled thinking (our rider) to come up with different interpretations.

Let’s begin training ourselves to gain control over our thoughts, feelings, and actions by identifying some ways that our interpretations can go awry.

**Mental traps**

As we just explained, our interpretations are formed by our elephant. Our elephants can create flaws in our automatic thinking that we’re totally unaware of. We’ll call these errors in our thinking **mental traps**.
Mental traps tend to be exaggerated and negative. These automatic thoughts can be about ourselves or others.

There are a number of extremely common traps we all fall into from time to time that can make sensitive conversations even more difficult.

We’re going to go through three of these mental traps together. We’ll then teach you a simple 3-part process to detect these traps, pull yourself out of them, and gain control over your emotions!

Let’s get started!

### Jumping to conclusions

The first mental trap is **jumping to conclusions**, which is our tendency to skip ahead to a particular conclusion, without enough evidence.

Jumping to conclusions usually takes one of these forms:

- **Mind reading**: Assuming we know what other people are thinking without sufficient evidence to back up our assumptions
- **Fortune telling**: Making predictions — often negative ones — about the future without adequate evidence to back them up

Let’s look at an example of jumping to conclusions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do you feel about cities and states banning businesses from using disposable plastic bags at checkout?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I support it. Businesses should use recyclable bags or encourage customers to bring their own reusable bags</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Imagine that your classmate heard you sharing your view and said,
"Wow, you really believe that it's okay that poor people should have to suffer because of this absurd policy, instead of making large corporations take more responsibility for environmental protections!"

"Wow, you really believe that business owners' freedom is more valuable than the human lives that will be lost due to climate change!"

In this example, your classmate jumped to conclusions about you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How would that make you feel?</th>
<th>Unfairly judged and offended</th>
<th>Respected and treated fairly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That makes sense!</td>
<td>That's surprising!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You never said anything about forcing poor people to bear the financial burden instead of corporations. But your classmate made assumptions about your thoughts and motives without adequate evidence, and painted your view in a negative light.

You never said anything about not caring about threats to human lives. But your classmate made assumptions about your thoughts and motives without adequate evidence, and painted your view in a negative light.

Now, imagine your classmate responded to your opinion differently.

Instead of accusing you of forcing poor people to bear the financial burden instead of corporations, they took a moment to reflect before saying,

"That's an interesting view. I think this is a pretty complicated issue. Have you considered the possibility that a plastic bag ban might negatively impact people in lower-income communities most?"

Instead of accusing you of not caring about threats to human lives, they took a moment to reflect before saying,

"That's an interesting view. I think this is a pretty complicated issue. Have you considered the possibility that plastic bags are contributing to dangerous levels of overpollution that may put people's lives at risk?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How would that make you feel?</th>
<th>Unfairly judged and offended</th>
<th>Respected and treated fairly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That's surprising!</td>
<td>That makes sense!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most people say that when someone asks them their opinion instead of making an assumption about what they believe, they feel respected.

If you catch yourself jumping to conclusions about someone else, you can think back to how it felt when your classmate did that to you.
Later in this lesson, we'll show you how to correct yourself when you jump to conclusions. Let's move on to the next mental trap.

All-or-nothing thinking

**All-or-nothing thinking** is when we think in terms of extremes without being able to acknowledge nuance. This is also called black-or-white thinking, because when we think in this way, we fail to recognize shades of gray. Examples of this are if we think of people as being either "good" or "evil", "with me" or "against me".

All-or-nothing thinking is often easy to detect, because it typically involves words that express absolutes, like "everything," "always," "never," "must," or "definitely."

For example, imagine that you're chatting with Matthew, and you mention an idea about how to improve your campus policies. Before you can even finish sharing your idea, he interjects with a thought: "Everybody knows that idea would never work."

How would you feel in response to Matthew's comment?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respected</th>
<th>Offended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That's very generous of you.</td>
<td>That's understandable!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His comment wasn't very considerate!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Matthew's claim that "everybody knows [your] idea would never work" shows that he's fallen into the mental trap of all-or-nothing thinking. Since he couldn't possibly be aware of what everybody else thinks about your idea, it's pretty clear that he's exaggerating. His elephant may be leading him astray, and that means it might be a challenge to pull off a thoughtful dialogue at the moment.
How can I have a conversation with someone who's fallen into mental traps?

Rest assured, you can still have a productive conversation with someone who succumbs to one of these mental traps. We all fall into them occasionally, because we're human and we make mistakes. In our next and final lesson of this program, we'll learn some specific techniques to get a conversation back on track after someone's elephant causes trouble.

Got it

All-or-nothing thinking is extremely common. It's much simpler and easier to think this way than to acknowledge nuance, complexity, or shades of gray.

The problem with this type of binary thinking — where we only see two opposing options instead of a full spectrum of possibility — is that it doesn't reflect how the world actually works.

The truth is often a balance between the "always" and the "never," between the "all" and the "nothing." For example, things may be neutral or in-between instead of either "perfect" or "terrible".

Thinking in extremes can also derail conversations. If we have a slight disagreement with someone, we may dismiss the other person as being "against us," instead of giving them a chance to explain themselves. Once we have this narrative, it's difficult to have a productive conversation.

Let's learn one last mental trap.

Okay

Labeling

Labeling is when we assign a judgmental label to something or someone, based on only one of its traits or limited evidence.

For example, you might assign labels to yourself like: "I'm an idiot" or "I'm a failure."

But you aren't just any one thing! In the words of the psychiatrist David Burns:
"Your life is a complex and ever-changing flow of thoughts, emotions, and actions....
[Y]ou are more like a river than a statue....Would you think of yourself exclusively as an 'eater' just because you eat, or a 'breather' just because you breathe?"

Beyond labeling ourselves, we often also label others. For example, you might think, "He's an idiot," or "She's a bad person." Just as the labels we assign to ourselves are often inaccurate, the labels we assign to others are often unfair and unproductive.

Tell me more

Labeling others often shuts down a conversation and damages relationships. When you call someone names, you're often riling up their elephant. They'll probably feel attacked, hurt, and defensive. They may either walk away from the conversation or hurl insults back at you.

What if I only think the label, and don't say it out loud?

Even if you only think of someone using a label, it tends to color your perception of them, which can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

For example, once you see someone as stupid, you'll likely engage in confirmation bias to reinforce your view of them. You may overemphasize their mistakes and discount the smart things they say.

Let's see an example of how labeling people affects our feelings towards them.

This exercise is tailored to the learner's political preference.
(If they have no preference, we'll randomly select one version for them.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learners who self-identify as liberal or moderate see...</th>
<th>Learners who self-identify as conservative or libertarian see...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imagine that you're talking with your classmate Shen about a teacher who's being considered to become the next Principal of your school. This teacher happens to be Muslim. Shen says he's not sure this teacher is really qualified for the position. You feel your body tense up, and then you hear yourself blurt out:</td>
<td>Imagine that you're talking with your classmate Shen. Shen mentions that he thinks your school should only offer fair trade coffee. You feel your body tense up, and then you hear yourself blurt out: &quot;The only reason you think that is because you're an elitist!&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11
"The only reason you think he's not qualified is because you're Islamophobic!"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When you think &quot;Shen is Islamophobic,&quot; how interested are you in continuing a conversation with him?</th>
<th>When you think &quot;Shen is an elitist,&quot; how interested are you in continuing a conversation with him?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all interested</td>
<td>Absolutely interested</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thanks for responding!

Shen likely won't appreciate that you called him "Islamophobic," and this conversation could turn hostile. Shen likely won't appreciate that you called him "an elitist," and this conversation could turn hostile.

You can still rescue the situation and have a productive discussion, but things are probably going to be somewhat tense between the two of you.

This example shows what kind of trouble our elephants can cause when they're driving what we say and how we act in difficult conversations.

How would you feel about continuing to talk to Shen if you instead thought, "I wonder why Shen thinks this? I'm curious to understand what's driving his position, even if I disagree."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all interested</th>
<th>Absolutely interested</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

If their answer shifted closer to "Absolutely interested" when asked a 2nd time...

Based on your responses, you'd feel more open to continuing a conversation with Shen if you gave him the benefit of the doubt compared to if you assigned him a negative label. That's how most people respond!

If their answer shifted closer to "Not at all interested" when asked a 2nd time...

Based on your responses, you'd feel less open to continuing a conversation with Shen if you gave him the benefit of the doubt, compared to if you assigned a negative label to him.

That's unusual — most people say the opposite!

If their answer remained the same when asked a 2nd time...

Based on your responses, you'd feel equally open to continuing a conversation with Shen, whether or not you assigned a negative label to him.

That's unusual! Most people say they'd feel more open to talking to Shen if they gave him the benefit of the doubt.
Author and educator Irshad Manji explains that when we assign labels to other people, "we are reducing people to something less than they actually are." She encourages us to keep in mind that everyone we interact with is just as complex and multifaceted as we know ourselves to be.

Also, other people may react very differently to you, depending on whether or not you label them. This is an example of how your automatic thoughts, feelings, and actions affect other people's actions — not just your own!

My thoughts, feelings, behaviors:

![Diagram showing the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors]

Got it

Review

We've just looked at three types of mental traps in detail, and we've explored how they can lead our emotions to hijack our brains and derail our interactions with others.

To summarize, these traps are:

- **Jumping to conclusions**: Reaching a conclusion without enough evidence
- **All-or-nothing thinking**: Thinking in extremes without acknowledging nuance
- **Labelling**: Assigning a judgmental label to something or someone, based on only one of its traits or limited evidence

Now, we can begin to put this knowledge to good use, to avoid these traps or pull ourselves out once we've fallen in!

Just so you know, there are more traps than the ones that we covered. But three is enough for now, and it's more important to practice how to overcome mental traps than it is to learn every single one.

Here are some others that are frequently referred to in CBT:

- **Catastrophizing** — blowing things out of proportion, e.g., "it's the end of the world"
- **Filtering** — only paying attention to certain information
- **Overgeneralizing** — extrapolating a pattern from a single event
- **Disqualifying the positive** — ignoring information if it's positive
- **Personalizing** — assuming things are your fault
In Lesson 1, we learned a powerful framework we can use to steer ourselves back towards clearer thinking when our elephant causes trouble: the Taking the Reins method. We’re going to build upon this method by adding a few more specific techniques to overcome mental traps.

By practicing this method, you can begin to form a habit to identify these mental traps and gain control of your emotions, before your emotions control you.

Before we get started, let’s recap the basic steps of Taking the Reins:

**Step 1. Detect when your elephant might be leading you into a trap**

The first step to overcoming our mental traps is to develop an awareness of when they're happening.

This can be surprisingly hard to do! As we discussed in Lesson 1, it’s much easier for us to spot when other people have errors in their thinking than it is to detect our own mistakes.

But hard doesn’t mean impossible — it just means that it takes a lot of practice. We’ll help you practice developing this awareness in this lesson, and give you guidance on how to keep practicing this skill in the future.

When we introduced Taking the Reins, we presented some clear “warning signs” to help us recognize when our elephant might be in control.

In this case, we’ll focus on the warning signs associated with our automatic feelings.
The easiest way to detect the warning signs associated with our automatic feelings is to pay close attention to their physiological effects — that is, how our feelings manifest in our bodies.

All of our strong negative automatic feelings — anger, hurt, fear, and so on — share a common foundation known as distress. You can tell you’re in a state of distress if you have any of these bodily signals:

- Your heart starts to beat faster
- Your body starts to tense up
- Your breathing becomes quicker and shallower
- Your face feels hot and flushed

When you notice any of these signs, it's good to consider whether you might be headed toward any traps in your automatic thinking.

Okay what's next?

**Step 2. Pause to identify the traps you've fallen into**

Once you've become aware of the warning signs, you should pause to slow down. This allows you to put your rider back in control.

Although this may sound trivial, pausing to take a few breaths is an incredibly powerful tool that allows us to regain control in heated moments. It helps sharpen our thinking and make better decisions.

Try taking three deep breaths. As you do so, notice the air moving through your nose or mouth. Feel your belly and chest rise and fall.

After you've paused to calm down your elephant, your rider can evaluate your automatic thoughts to identify whether it has any mental traps.

Let's practice identifying mental traps in a few examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which trap(s) do you detect in this thought? &quot;Anna just said that she doesn't think concealed carry should be allowed on school grounds. Clearly she doesn't care at all about the second amendment.&quot; [Select all that apply.]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Jumping to conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. All-or-nothing thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Labeling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The statement "Clearly she doesn't care at all about making college more accessible to lower-income students" is an example of jumping to conclusions about why Anna doesn't think college tuition should be free for all students.

This statement also displays all-or-nothing thinking: It assumes that Anna is either 100% committed to making college free for everyone, or she doesn't care about making college more accessible to lower-income students whatsoever. In reality, there are a lot of shades of gray between those two extremes!

Let's consider another example.

The "thought" that appears in this question is tailored to the learner's political preference. (If they have no preference, we'll randomly select one version for them.)

**Do you detect any traps in this thought?**
[Select all that apply.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learners who self-identify as liberal or moderate see...</th>
<th>Learners who self-identify as conservative or liberatarian see...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;This person's social media profile shows that she follows Fox News anchors. It's definitely not worth my time to talk about sensitive topics with her, since she's clearly a brainwashed conservative.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;This person's social media profile shows that she uses the pronouns 'she' and 'her'. It's definitely not worth my time to talk about sensitive topics with her, since she's clearly a radical liberal.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**A, B & C**

- That's exactly it!

**Any two out of three traps**

- Almost!

**Any other response**

- That's not quite right.
This automatic thought actually displays all three traps.

| Calling someone "a brainwashed conservative" on the basis of one thing you've observed about them is an instance of labeling. | Calling someone "a radical liberal" on the basis of one thing you've observed about them is an instance of labeling. |

The thought also jumps to a conclusion about what someone thinks on the basis of insufficient evidence. Lastly, saying that it's "definitely" not worth your time to speak with them shows that you’re thinking in extremes.

Now that we've practiced identifying these traps, let's move on to the final step...

I'm ready

**Step 3. Correct your elephant's missteps**

Once we’re able to identify the traps present in our automatic thoughts, we can plot our escape using our rider (controlled thinking).

As we learned from ancient thinkers like Buddha and Epictetus, we have the power to control our interpretation of the world around us. The way we interpret events and the stories we tell ourselves will shape our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

We can choose to take a step back, analyze a situation clearly, and think about what might be a more accurate and productive way to interpret it. You can think of this as your rider outsmarting your elephant by reframing your thoughts.

There are lots of ways to challenge our flawed automatic thoughts and replace them with reframed alternatives. We recommend applying three techniques that we call **The Three Es**:

1. **Check for evidence**: Take a moment to consider all of the information that could inform your judgment. Is there proof that your thoughts match up with the facts?

2. **Eliminate exaggeration**: Take a closer look at the words that feature in your thoughts: Are they blowing things out of proportion? Can you dial them down a notch?

3. **Consider alternative explanations**: Take some time to think: Could the real reason underlying what you observed be different from what you first assumed? Are there other possible ways to explain the situation?
Let's practice using these techniques to escape our mental traps!

Great

We'll start reframing our thinking with a couple of examples that we've already seen. Then we'll put it all together using a new example.

There were two traps present in this automatic thought: "Anna just said that she doesn't think concealed carry should be allowed on school grounds. Clearly she doesn't care at all about the second amendment."

We identified them as jumping to conclusions and all or nothing thinking. Now let's practice using the Three Es!

1. We can begin by checking the evidence for this thought. Do you know with absolute certainty that Anna doesn't care about the second amendment?

2. Next, let's eliminate exaggeration. A few words in this thought, like "clearly" and "at all," go to unnecessary extremes. Can you swap them out for more nuanced language?

3. Lastly, we can consider alternative explanations. Can you come up with some reasons why someone who cares about the second amendment might think that concealed carry shouldn't be allowed on college grounds?

Now that you've applied these techniques, you can substitute a new and improved version of this thought.

What would be a reframed version of that automatic thought about Anna?

Enter text...

You wrote: "[Their response here]"

Here's another possible way to reframe your thinking: "It's possible that Anna doesn't care very much about the second amendment, but I suppose it could be that she thinks concealed carry, in particular, is dangerous at school."
Notice how the new thought doesn't rule out the possibility that Anna doesn't value the second amendment. However, instead of assuming there's only one way to explain someone's position on this issue, it considers other possibilities as well.

Let's do another one

Remember this automatic thought?

This exercise is tailored to the learner's political preference. (If they have no preference, we'll randomly select one version for them.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learners who self-identify as liberal or moderate see...</th>
<th>Learners who self-identify as conservative or libertarian see...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;This person's social media profile shows that she follows Fox News anchors. It's definitely not worth my time to talk about sensitive topics with her, since she's clearly a brainwashed conservative.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;This person's social media profile shows that she uses the pronouns she and her. It's definitely not worth my time to talk about sensitive topics with her, since she's clearly a radical liberal.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This thought involved all three traps: jumping to conclusions, all-or-nothing thinking, and labeling.

Let's reconsider the evidence for this thought.

Do you know for a fact that this person is "a brainwashed conservative"? Is that even something you can know objectively, or is it just a subjective impression about a person? Do you know for a fact that this person is "a radical liberal"? Is that even something you can know objectively, or is it just a subjective impression about a person?

Now, let's eliminate exaggeration. Is it "definitely" the case that a conversation won't be worthwhile, or is this more like a possibility? Is it so "clearly" the case that she holds extreme views?

Finally, consider alternative explanations.

Can you think of reasons why someone would follow Fox News anchors, even if they aren't a conservative-leaning thinker? Can you think of reasons why someone would define their pronouns as she and her, even if they aren't a devoted activist around issues related to gender?
Now's your chance to reframe your thinking!

What would be an reframed version of that automatic thought about this person who follows Fox News anchors?

What would be an reframed version of that automatic thought about this person who defines their pronouns?

You wrote: "[Their reframed thought here]"

Here's another possible way to reframe your thinking:

"This person’s social media profile says that they follow Fox News Anchors. I suppose that they might be interested in learning what conservative-leaning people have to say, specifically to understand the views of people who think differently than them. But I won't really know what their views really are until I learn more about them."

"This person’s social media profile says that they define their pronouns. I suppose that they might feel strongly about making people feel included regardless of their gender identity. But I won't really know what their views really are until I learn more about them."

Now, we can take a step back and ask...how would this reframed thought make you feel towards this person?

Probably much better than the original, automatic thought made you feel. Whatever differences in values we find between ourselves and other people, it's really what we make of those differences that determines how we feel about each other.

And these feelings can have a dramatic impact on how we interact with others. By choosing to control our thoughts and emotions, rather than allowing them to control us, we can set ourselves up for far more constructive conversations when it comes to the issues that matter most to us.
Are you saying I should just be positive all the time?

Not at all! Reframing is not about being unrealistically positive. It’s about seeing things in as realistic and balanced a way as possible.

Sometimes, the most realistic interpretation might be even more negative than your original interpretation; but in many cases, it will be more positive.

Time to put this all together!

Okay

To recap, we can use Taking the Reins to manage our emotions by following these steps:

**Step 1 | Detect** when your elephant might be leading you into a trap.

**Step 2 | Pause** to identify traps you’ve fallen into.

**Step 3 | Correct** your elephant’s missteps by reframing your thinking.

Now, let’s see how we can reframe our thinking in the midst of a disagreement with someone.

We’re intentionally going to use a very sensitive, emotionally-charged issue so that you can put these skills into practice in a controlled setting.

To start off, we’d like to hear your view on the issue of immigration — which is commonly referred to as migration outside the United States. To address this issue, some people believe that countries need to create more legal avenues for immigration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do you feel about creating more legal avenues for immigration?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[If you’re not sure how you feel about this idea, you can put the slider at the midpoint between these two positions.]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I completely oppose it</th>
<th>I fully support it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If their answer was closer to &quot;I completely oppose it&quot;</th>
<th>If their answer was closer to &quot;I fully support it&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imagine that you’re chatting with Theo, who mentions that he supports creating more avenues for legal immigration.</td>
<td>Imagine that you’re chatting with Theo, who mentions that he opposes creating more avenues for legal immigration.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| You disagree with his stance on this issue. | }
As you listen to Theo speak, you notice that your face is starting to feel hot, and your heart rate has sped up.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When you notice physical sensations like these, what should you do?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ignore them and pretend like nothing’s happening</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actually, these sensations are often an important clue that your elephant is in charge! When you detect signals like these, it’s a good idea to check in with your automatic thoughts, in case there are any traps in your thinking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If their answer was closer to &quot;I completely oppose it&quot;</th>
<th>If their answer was closer to &quot;I fully support it&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You direct your attention to your thoughts, as Theo continues to explain that he supports creating more avenues for legal immigration. Imagine that you catch yourself thinking about Theo, <em>&quot;I can't believe he supports creating more avenues for legal immigration. He's obviously a radical globalist. He must want to put the needs of other countries above our own.&quot;</em></td>
<td>You direct your attention to your thoughts, as Theo continues to explain that he opposes creating more avenues for legal immigration. Imagine that you catch yourself thinking about Theo, <em>&quot;I can't believe he opposes creating more avenues for legal immigration. He's obviously a radical nationalist. He must sympathize with the anti-immigrant agenda.&quot;</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you detect any of these traps in your automatic thought?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[Select all that apply]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Jumping to conclusions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A, B &amp; C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Great job!

You're close!

Not quite.

This automatic thought contains all three traps.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If their answer was closer to</th>
<th>If their answer was closer to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>&quot;I fully support it&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First off, calling Theo "a radical globalist" is an example of labeling: defining a person's character on the basis of one brief encounter with them.

You've also jumped to conclusions, by assuming that you know the reason why Theo supports creating more avenues for legal immigration, without asking him to share his reasoning.

Lastly, using the words "obviously" and "must" shows that you're thinking in absolutes, which is a sign of all-or-nothing thinking.

Now, let's apply the Three Es to reframe your thoughts about Theo.

You thought: "I can't believe he supports creating more avenues for legal immigration. He's obviously a radical globalist. He must want to put the needs of other countries above our own."

You thought: "I can't believe he opposes creating more avenues for legal immigration. He's obviously a radical nationalist. He must sympathize with the anti-immigrant agenda."

To start, let's reconsider the evidence.

Are you sure that all the evidence you have shows that Theo is a radical globalist, or that he supports creating more avenues for legal migration for the reason you assumed?

Are you sure that all the evidence you have shows that Theo is a radical nationalist, or that he opposes creating more avenues for legal migration for the reason you assumed?

Yes | No
---|---
Are you certain about that? | Right!

Yes | No
---|---
Are you certain about that? | Right!
It's hard to judge someone's character based off of one encounter, and besides — just because someone disagrees with us doesn't automatically mean that they're a radical globalist.

You also might want to consider that Theo's thinking about why he supports creating more avenues for legal immigration could be different from what you assumed.

You won't know what his reasoning is until you talk to him about it.

Next up in the Three Es: eliminating exaggeration.

In what ways might you be exaggerating by thinking, "He's obviously a radical globalist. He must want to put the needs of other countries above our own"?

You might have pinpointed phrases like "He's obviously..." and "He must..." as instances of exaggeration in your thinking.

You can eliminate that exaggeration by substituting those words with alternatives like "It's possible that he...," "It could be that...," and so on. These phrases leave room for the possibility that Theo might be different from how you initially interpreted him.

Let's wrap up the Three Es by considering alternative explanations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What's a possible explanation for why Theo supports creating more avenues for legal migration for the reason you assumed?</th>
<th>What's a possible explanation for why Theo opposes creating more avenues for legal migration for the reason you assumed?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great work! Let's say that you think to yourself, &quot;It's possible that Theo supports creating more avenues for legal immigration for this reason: [the reason they just gave].&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;It's possible that Theo opposes creating more avenues for legal immigration for this reason: [the reason they just gave].&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let's check in with how you feel about this conversation, now that you've considered a different interpretation of Theo's statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How does your current feeling about Theo compare to how you felt when you labeled him as a radical globalist?</th>
<th>How does your current feeling about Theo compare to how you felt when you labeled him as a radical nationalist?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Thanks for sharing!

After reframing their thoughts about Theo, most people are more comfortable proceeding with this conversation. They're also in a mental and emotional space where they are set up for a more successful conversation about this sensitive topic.

By approaching Theo in a less emotionally-charged state, you're more likely to understand why he believes what he believes. You might also be more effective in shifting his beliefs than you would be if you resorted to shutting down or lashing out.

Would you like to practice reframing a thought from your own life? [This will involve some self-reflection about recent negative emotions you've experienced.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes, please</th>
<th>No, thanks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Let's do it, [learner’s name here]!
Think of a time in the past few weeks when you felt a significant negative emotion. For example, maybe you felt rage, aggravation, betrayal, or humiliation.

What was the automatic thought that sparked the emotion?

[If you can’t remember exactly what it was, you can guess what you might have been thinking.]

Enter text...

You wrote: "[the automatic thought they just wrote]"

Does this automatic thought have any errors?

Yes

No

That’s great! But for the sake of practice, can you try a different one?

Which mental trap(s) are present in that thought?

[Select all that apply.]

A. Jumping to conclusions
B. All-or-nothing thinking
C. Labeling

Now, take a step back and reread what your original thought was: "[the automatic thought they just wrote]"

Can you reframe that thought in a more balanced way?

[You might try reconsidering the evidence, eliminating exaggeration, or considering alternative explanations.]

Enter text...

You wrote: "[the automatic thought they just wrote]"

Think about how that would have made you feel in the moment.

Would you have felt better or worse than you did originally?

Better

Worse
We're glad to hear!  

Sorry to hear that! Sometimes this process doesn't work out perfectly. More often, though, people find it pretty helpful.

You've learned quite a lot in this lesson!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>This feels hard to do in real life.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It's true that despite knowing all this, it can be challenging to put into practice. Even if we're aware of mental traps, they're likely to pop up in our thinking. So, are we doomed to have errors in our automatic thoughts — and suffer from extreme emotions — no matter what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No! It may seem like a lot of work at first, but the more we practice, the easier it becomes. This process of identifying mental traps and reframing our thoughts gets faster and more intuitive. Eventually, it can become just as automatic as our automatic thoughts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By taking control of our interpretations we can gradually gain more control over our emotions — which can prove especially helpful in tough conversations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How do I practice?

Life hack time!

Glad you asked! Here is a straightforward life hack to get the ball rolling:

Keep a thoughts journal. In your journal, draw a table that looks like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Negative emotion(s)</th>
<th>Automatic thought</th>
<th>Any errors?</th>
<th>Mental trap(s)</th>
<th>3 Es (check for Evidence, Exaggeration, &amp; Evaluate alternatives)</th>
<th>Reframed thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9am</td>
<td>Anger, frustration</td>
<td>I can't find my keys! I'm going to be late for work. Why does this always happen?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>All-or-nothing thinking</td>
<td>This doesn't always happen. Most mornings I can find my keys.</td>
<td>I'm worried about being late. This makes me stressed. Later today I can think about a better system for tracking my stuff.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alternatively, you can print out copies of this sheet. We'll send you a link to a PDF in your summary email.

Over the next 24 hours, whenever you experience a negative or extreme emotion, write it down. In the next column, write down the automatic thought that sparked the emotion. Determine whether any errors are present in that thought, and, if so, identify the specific traps you may have fallen into.
In the next column, specify how you fell into those traps: how did your elephant get things wrong? Finally, reframe it all into a more balanced thought.

We guarantee you'll find this educational, if not enlightening. Keeping this kind of journal can be a transformative experience! If you like it, continue to do it for the following days, then weeks, and even months—until reframing traps becomes an automatic habit for you!

Got it

Self-Reflection

Before we wrap up, let's do some brief self-reflection.

What's the key takeaway you learned from this lesson?

Enter text...

In the upcoming week, how will you implement this key takeaway in your life?

Enter text...

That's it for Lesson 7!
We'll send you a summary of the material in this lesson in 24 hours.

This lesson introduced one element of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which can benefit everyone regardless of their mental health. If you liked learning about CBT, we recommend you check out the book Feeling Good, by David D. Burns M.D. It covers all this — and much more — in an easy-to-read, accessible way.

In our next and final lesson, we'll put everything we've learned so far into practice. We'll also teach you a few more specific techniques to navigate difficult conversations successfully.