



## Automatic Thoughts: Enablers Of Success

by Esther Muller and Michael Williams, Ph.D.



Your client states *Why are my product orders delivered late? They continue The late deliveries inhibit my ability to effectively service my customers...my best customers are getting irritated!* What are your immediate thoughts? For example, do you:

- Catastrophize - *Oh no, this is terrible! I'm so upset! My relationship with this client is ruined!*
- Overgeneralize - *Here I go again! This proves that I don't have what it takes to be successful.*
- Personalize - *The client is rude! I didn't delay the deliveries, it was the ABC Company!*
- Labeling - *Great...This client is impossible and I'm a failure!*

Our immediate, automatic thoughts inform us about how we conceptualize ourselves and others. Moreover, they provide a mental model for how we perceive situations and the meaning we apply to them. Many psychological professionals believe that it is how we think about events, not the events themselves that influence how we respond. If true, then we may conclude that we control our cognitions and emotions relative to all situations we encounter. How we perceive and interpret events and the meanings we apply is central to personal happiness and professional success.

What are automatic thoughts and why is it important to know more about them? Let's turn to Dr. Aaron Beck, the originator of Cognitive Behavior Theory, emeritus professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania, and the director of the Aaron T. Beck Psychopathology Research Center.

### Automatic Thoughts and Belief

Automatic thoughts emanate from our genetic pre-disposition, cultural influences, and personal belief systems. As a result, we create operational contexts or "rules for living" in our environments. Dr. Beck offers that people have a "control system" that in conjunction with other human systems, "modulate, modify, and inhibit" our impulses. He states "Our control system is based on beliefs, many or most of which are realistic or adaptive." Dr. Beck shares that our beliefs are automatically translated into directives informing us what to do and how to act. Ultimately, our interpretation of these directives governs our decision-making and achievement.

Automatic thoughts are triggered constantly as we attempt to make sense of events in our world. Our minds are vigilant; creating narratives that provide meaning in order to maximize stabil-

ity, and reconciling inconsistencies with our beliefs. Automatic thoughts can enable meaning and sense making by assisting us to quickly evaluate situations and determine if conditions are risky and safe. Conversely, automatic thoughts can negatively influence our decision making by stimulating us to make quick decisions without the benefit of possessing sufficient relevant data. This condition can promote unhealthy mental states such as anxiety and acute stress, which can cause poor performance and unhappiness.

### Cognitive Model and Rationality

Dr. Beck developed a cognitive model suggesting that our thoughts about things stimulate emotions, not *things* stimulating emotions. His conceptualization of the cognitive model, which explains how thoughts, emotions, and behaviors associate, is titled *Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)*. The cognitive model challenges the viability of our subjective experiences as emotions can cause inaccurate thinking about goals and the strategies necessary to achieve them. A primary objective of the cognitive model is to help individuals modify their inaccurate or distorted thinking in favor of more objectives, data driven beliefs, in turn views of the world.

### Think-Feel-Do

If our beliefs frame how we think about the world, they in turn can influence how we perceive others and events. Moreover, if our emotions are stimulated by how we think, then we can trace the influence of our beliefs on thought, emotion, and work. So, before responding to your client who stated *Why are my product orders delivered late?* First, recognize your automatic thoughts and second, ask yourself the following questions: *What are my automatic thoughts? How do I feel? What action will I choose to take and why?*

Coaches trained in CBT can help you understand your "think-feel-do" schema and assist you in becoming more productive.

As we write; Get Coached; Get results! ■

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