

**“Attitude is Everything”
practical strategies to challenge negative thinking**

by Rob Long (2008)

“Nothing would be done at all if we waited until we could
do it so well that no one could find fault with it.”

John Henry

Learning depends upon mistakes being made. We learn through practice and receiving feedback. The more we are frightened of failing the less we allow ourselves to learn. Any complex skill involves making mistakes. Confidence to take the knocks of failures essential, but it is our belief that our efforts are not in vain, that allows us to persist.

We can see immediately that being a confident learner is not enough. The emphasis on learners having a good self esteem has not been misguided, but it fails to tackle a more fundamental issue, the learners core beliefs about themselves and learning.

From an early age we all develop core beliefs that become so familiar to us that they can pass seemingly unnoticed. These beliefs are ways in which we make sense of how we relate to the world. These “words in your heart” (Seligman 1984) determine how we respond to situations. As Epitectus put it.

“It is not things themselves that disturb us
but the view we take of them.”

Some of the most commonly held beliefs that can guide us are:

I must be strong
I should please others
I should be perfect

(These can be both positive and negative.)

In many of our classrooms there are children who for numerous reasons have a negative attitude towards learning. Children with specific learning difficulties are especially at risk. They will often have a poor sense of personal worth. Many children learn that to be valued is to be clever. They live in a learning

environment that tests them for their successes, not their efforts, determination and enjoyment. For those with learning difficulties it is hardly surprising that they come to see themselves as not as valued as those who are successful learners.

These children can become reluctant and resistant primary school learners, and disaffected and disengaged secondary school learners. Why should they enter a competition in which they have only experienced failure. School staff notice how these children often shy away from praise, no matter how small the task is made to ensure success, they still seem reluctant to try.

“Discouraged children, trapped in a self-concept created by past experiences of failure, will lose out in a particularly disheartening way when a praising teacher fails to understand, and thus to address, the effects of such painful experiences on their low self-image as learners. Consequently, a praise refusing student’s determination not to be lured into the risks of failing yet again may be further reinforced.”

Hanko 1994 p 166

quoted in understanding Pupil behaviour in schools

Wearmouth J., Richmond R., Glynn T. & Berryman M. 2004 Fultons London

Beliefs

We need to tackle thoughts and beliefs as much as self esteem. and behaviour, Each of these components interact with each other. Expecting to fail can lead to failure, lacking confidence can lead to failure.

What you think effects what you do and what you feel

What you do effects what you think and what you feel

What you feel effects what you think and what you do

Much emphasis has been put on the Feeling and Doing sides, but far less on the “What you think” A child who faces learning difficulties is at risk of developing such core beliefs as:

I always get things wrong

I’m not as clever as others

I can’t organise myself

I am not as valued as others

These core beliefs - formed through early learning experiences, give rise to a

constant stream of what are known as “automatic thoughts”. These influence what we feel and what we do. (It should be stressed that our core beliefs are usually a mixture of positive and negative.)

Beliefs such as these make assumptions about how we will respond in new situations. From these subconscious beliefs come conscious automatic thoughts.

We can picture the mind as an ice berg. Our conscious thoughts are the tip of the ice berg above water. These we are aware of. But below the surface are many beliefs about ourselves and other people. These beliefs are triggered by specific events, a new learning challenge, that throws up into conscious awareness automatic negative interpretations. And because we hear them so often, we are familiar with them, and the more we hear them, the more we come to believe them.

For example, You have the thought that you “will mess up”, in this test”, so you try less hard and prepare less than you should, so you do mess up, which confirms the truth about the thought that you had in the first place.

What a viscous circle.

What is to be done?

Having outlined the problem what can we can do? Below are briefly outlined some of the key techniques to challenge the distorted core beliefs that hold many learners back form achieving their potential. Their core beliefs and negative automatic thoughts prevent them from risking success.

THE TOOLS

Linking thoughts, feelings and actions

The more the learner understands the link between thoughts, feelings and actions, then the more likely the techniques are to work.

What we think effects our actions – ‘I think you like me so I smile when we meet’.

What we think effects how we feel – ‘I think you like me so I enjoy being with you’.

What we do effects what we think – ‘I avoid the playground because I think I might get hurt’.

Depending on the cognitive ability of the child use one of the following two exercises to help establish the links.

Exercise One - Thoughts and Feelings

This exercise is most appropriate for primary aged children, but can be adapted for secondary. It will take approximately 20 minutes and it's effectiveness can be seen when the learner can see the link between thoughts, feelings and actions in other everyday situations.

The story lends itself to a simple cartoon character. It can be changed to include the latest mobile phone or computer game in use instead of a kite. (Friedberg and McClure 2002)

Part 1

Once there was a little boy/girl (Use the same gender as the learner and ask the child to think up a name for this character e.g. Sam)

Now Sam really loved kites and he had seen a bright red and yellow one in a shop near where he lived. Sam thought that if he had a kite like that he would be the happiest boy in the world.

Then on his birthday he was given the kite by his family.

Ask the learner - How do you think Sam felt? And what do you think Sam was thinking?

Key points:

Involve the child as much as possible in all parts of the story. Break down the thinking, feeling and action parts of the story into simple and specific terms. Summarise the story and check for understanding.

Part 2

Do you know what happened next? A really strong gust of wind pulled the kite out of Sam's hand and went flying far away.

Ask the learner – Do you think Sam will still be happy? Can you draw a face of how Sam is feeling? What do you think Sam will be thinking now? What has changed?

Discuss the situation in simple terms with the learner - Sam felt good and had happy thoughts when he had a kite, but when he lost it all that changed.

Help the learner make the link between what we think, feel and what happens to us.

The effectiveness of this exercise can be seen when the learner can identify the link between thoughts, feelings and actions in other everyday situations.

Exercise Two - Three Step Push Button Emotional Change Technique

This exercise is most appropriate for secondary, it will take approximately 20 minutes and it's effectiveness can be seen when the learner can use the technique to control and change his/her negative feelings. The approach was devised by Alfred Adler (1969) and aims to teach how thoughts can change feelings.

Preparation and Validation

Firstly talk about negative feelings and that it is OK for the individual with those type of feelings to feel bad and annoyed when people say "Cheer up" or "Snap out of it". Sometimes if the learner is in a bad mood it is alright to just accept it and feel bad.

BUT if the individual wants to change the mood then it is possible.

Step 1

Firstly, enable the learner to recognise the negative feeling for what it is:

sadness

anger

depression,

and then explore together how these different moods can be safely expressed, for example –

punching a pillow, painting, drawing, shouting, crying, grimacing, fist- shaking, kicking a ball, writing a letter.

Step 2

Thinking can be described as the button that can be pushed to change a bad feeling into a good one. Enable the young person to explore what makes him/her laugh, or what is funny. It could be something that the adult may not find particularly funny at all!

Allow the learner to practice thinking about these thoughts, and for him/her to be aware in a change of mood, a lifting of spirits, that occurs. Discuss with the learner how to think of this humorous situation the next time he/she feels sad or depressed so that a new, more positive feeling is allowed to replace the negative one.

The individual now has a quick technique that can be practiced to change his/her state of feeling, anytime and anywhere. If the learner is readily able to do this, then explore those thoughts that can also lead to feelings of anger and sadness.

Step 3

If appropriate explain the “Contagion Principle”. This can be described as the tendency to “catch” feelings from other people. If children are in a good mood they are likely to influence other friends into a good mood as well. Check if the young person knows how to get Mum or Dad into a good mood and if this technique also works on specific teachers.

This is furthering the young person’s knowledge about feelings and how he/she can have a strong degree of control over not only personal feelings but other people’s feelings as well.

Thought Identification and Balanced Thinking

The following two exercises are useful for upper primary and secondary aged learners, taking approximately 30 minutes. The effectiveness can be observed when the learner can use the technique to control and change negative feelings.

There are numerous activities that can be used to help learners think more clearly and manage negative thoughts but many of them need to be used in conjunction with each other. For example, Thought Identification will need to be followed with Balanced Thinking. The learner needs to have identified specific thoughts before challenging them.

Thought Identification

Help the learner to identify the negative thoughts that pop into his/her head when faced with certain situations and challenges - personal awareness is an important first step. Enable the learner to identify the specifics about the event because more detail gives a clearer picture of the scenario. For example,

Was the child in the playground or classroom? Did the negative thoughts occur when there was a certain type of work to do? When did the negative thoughts and who else was there? Allow the child to describe the situation in detail, and what thoughts and feelings were occurring. Refer back to the previous story to reinforce the link between thoughts and feelings.

Balanced thinking

After identifying negative thoughts linked to a specific event, e.g. ‘I’m going to get this wrong because I’m no good at writing’, work through the following questions with the learner:

Is there hard evidence to support this thought?

What would your best friend say to you, if he/she heard you thinking in this way?

What would you say to your best friend if he/she had this thought?

Balanced thinking is not trying to deny reality, but give a balanced view, rather than an “all or nothing” approach. Balanced thinking is about helping the learner to include more information, to ask useful questions, to not accept negative thoughts as being totally correct - negative thinking tries to ignore positive information.

Thought stopping

This exercise is most appropriate for secondary level pupils. It will take approximately 10 minutes and it’s effectiveness can be observed when the learner can use the technique to report control over negative thoughts that interfere with success.

Thoughts are like water that makes a pathway in the sand because of the track that it always follows. The more we think about situations in a certain way, then the more likely it is that the same thought pattern will occur the next time we are in a similar situation.

Wearing an elastic band around the wrist can help a pupil break negative thought habits. By snapping the band against his/her wrist whenever a negative thought occurs helps to stop the train of thought, and to remind him/her that it is a thought that can be controlled.

Another simple idea is to take a negative thought and associate it with a tune that makes the pupil smile / laugh. Then whenever the thought occurs there is a tendency to hear the tune coming along with it. It takes practice, but then breaking any over-learned habits will always take some effort!

Another technique is to record all of the negative thoughts that have occurred by the end of the day – write them down on paper or type them out and print them on a computer. Then screw up or tear up the paper and throw those useless thoughts into the rubbish bin, where they belong.

Giving the pupil strategies to deal with the negative thoughts is the first step towards taking control and mastering them. Allowing the learner to give up is the easy but unhelpful option.

Remember:

Helping a learner to control his/her thinking is not a quick fix option, it takes time. The individual will need to explore a number of methods to find which works for him/her personally. Some techniques will not work, but the more practice is achieved the more effective any technique is likely to become.

Take command

This exercise is most appropriate for upper primary and secondary learners. It will take approximately 20 minutes and its effectiveness can be observed when the pupil can clearly and readily make the distinction between the different types of statements.

This activity involves the learner reading a set of statements and deciding whether each statement shows either *Self in control*, or *Self blame*. The aim is for the child to understand that many thoughts just do not help towards to gaining control. It is only through recognising these thoughts that they can be challenged and changed.

With the learner, discuss the following statements and ask him/her to choose which ones most closely describe their situation. The aim is to support and encourage the statements that reflect personal responsibility.

Draw a line with *Self in control* at one end, and *Self blame* at the other. Check that the learner understands the difference between thoughts that are self-blaming and those that are about self-control to improve matters. If certain persistent and negative self blame thoughts are identified, then they can be used in the previous **Balanced Thinking** exercise.

The learner puts a mark on the line to show where they think each statement belongs.

Self control

Self blame

I'm stupid, the others are cleverer than me.

I messed up on that test, I'll need to practice more.

I get called names because no one likes me.

I will join a lunchtime club and meet new people.

I can never remember what I'm told.

I will get a notebook to write down tasks to do.

I failed the spelling test.

I will make cards and read them over.

I get distracted where I sit.

I will ask to be moved.

Task engagement

This exercise is most appropriate for primary and secondary learners. It will take approximately 20 minutes and it's effectiveness can be observed when the pupil can approach new tasks, using the different steps.

The following is adapted from a model by Hastings (1992) and can be used to help learners explore specific tasks in a way that will develop constructive and positive thinking.

Firstly, with the learner find a task that is to be completed.

Step 1 set the task

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.....
.....
.....

Step 2 Action Plan

The following questions will help the learner systematically analyse the nuts and bolts of the task as well as his/her attitude and feelings towards it.

Key questions

- 1 *What needs to be done to complete the task?*
- 2 *What will be the completed goal?*
- 3 *What resources are needed to complete the task?*
- 4 *What skills and qualities are needed?*
- 5 *How long will the task take to complete?*
- 6 *How difficult is the task? Indicate this on a scale of 1 - 10 where 1 is not very difficult, 10 is very difficult.*
- 7 *How interesting is the task? Indicate this on a scale of 1 - 10 where 1 is not very interesting, 10 is very interesting.)*

Add further questions if appropriate

- 8
- 9
- 10

This discussion should last no longer than a five minutes and should include ideas to overcome any identified difficulties.

Step 3 Task Review

NB. At this stage draw the learner's attention to the progress made and how this was achieved. This increases a student's sense of competency and shows that success depends on effort not only ability and luck.

Key questions

- 1 *To what extent were the goals achieved?*
- 2 *Was the plan a good one?*
- 3 *What improvements could be made?*
- 4 *Was it as difficult as expected?*
- 5 *Was it as interesting as expected?*
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

New goals

With the learner explore the next goals that need to be set and encourage the learner to work through the same steps again.

Attribution retraining

This exercise is most appropriate for secondary learners and will take approximately 20 minutes. It’s effectiveness can be observed when the learner can clearly and readily make the distinction between the different types of statements.

When pupils use strategies that are ultimately self-defeating - such as withholding effort, cheating, procrastination - their goal is actually to protect their sense of self-worth. Attribution retraining, involves modelling - that is the learner hearing and seeing the steps an adult takes to tackle a problem. For example, “I will need to break this task down into smaller parts if I am going to make progress”. The most important part of reattribution training is providing many opportunities for the learner to practice.

The goals are to help learners:

- (1) concentrate on the tasks rather than becoming distracted by fear of failure;
- (2) respond to frustration by retracing their steps to find mistakes or working out alternative ways of approaching a problem instead of giving up;
- (3) attribute their failures to insufficient effort, lack of information, or reliance on ineffective strategies rather than to lack of ability.

When undertaking reattribution training help the learner see that the effort involved in learning a new task is an investment towards success, rather than a risk that involves failure. The learner cannot hope to succeed without effort. As progress is made show the child and emphasise how skills are increasing in a

specific area. A key task for the practitioner as the child's supporter is to focus on how well new skills are being mastered, through the child's own effort and perseverance.

The potential payoff to this approach is having students who value learning for its own sake. This is priceless and so it is crucial for school and home to devote themselves fully to encouraging, maintaining, and rekindling pupils' motivation to learn.

Restorative Problem-solving

This exercise is most appropriate for upper primary and secondary learners, it will take approximately 10 minutes and its effectiveness can be seen when the learner understands the consequences of the behaviour on other people. It is a very good example of how to turn behavioural mistakes into learning opportunities.

Question 1 What happened?

Instead of focussing on 'Why' a behavioural problem occurred - the reasons are usually complex and not fully understood by the individual - it is better to ask, "What happened? With sensitive questioning this should produce a clearer account of what took place. The fact that no blame is attributed can help the perpetrator give a more honest account of his behaviour. For example, "I pushed Tim in the playground and he fell over."

Question 2 Who has been affected & how?

The next line of questioning is aimed at helping the learner understand the consequences of his actions. To continue the example of Tim being pushed, the consequences might be that he fell over and started crying. Again reasons for the actions are not the focus. Through staying with the actual event, the learner is being asked to focus on the actions and the consequences in a non-judgemental manner. It can be expected for children to make behavioural mistakes as they do not yet have an adult repertoire for coping in difficult situations, but future behaviour can depend upon how these mistakes are handled at the time.

Question 3 How can the situation be made things better?

This is the restorative phase of the exercise. How can the perpetrator make amends? Saying 'sorry' can far too easy and no real learning from the incident will have been achieved. If someone has been hurt then the perpetrator could make amends through some activity to cheer the victim up, for example by drawing a picture or by being their special buddy for the day. If the problem has been the disrupting of a lesson, then giving up time to make something

constructive for the classroom might again be a better consequence than being kept in at break time.

Question 4 What have we learnt to help us make better choices next time? This is when alternative behaviours could be explored that could be prove useful in the future. The learner could be given some specific tasks to practice in order to help them cope better next time.

Personal Responsibility and Self Understanding

This exercise is most appropriate for secondary learners and will take approximately 10 minutes. Its effectiveness can be seen when the learner understands that when poor behavioural choices are made there is an expectation that he/she will analyse the choices, understand them and learn from them.

A simple log sheet can be used to systematically work through a problem behaviour. Working with the learner, the incident is dated and recorded, in as much detail as possible. Questions like, Who, What Where When? can be used. “Who were you with, what were you doing, where were you and when did it happen?”

Next, and more difficult, is questioning how the individual contributed to the problem. Is the learner able to see and take responsibility for specific actions that led to the problem occurring? If so, can he/she consider alternative actions that would have prevented the problem? This can lead into thinking about and possibly practising alternatives. Sometimes this approach will not seem to work initially and it can be much to expect from learners to stand back and reflect on their actions. However, just because it does not work at first should not discourage practitioners from introducing elements of it. Gradually breakthroughs can take place and insight and personal responsibility achieved by learners.

Example Log Sheet:

Date of incident.....

What happened, where did it happen, who was involved?

.....

I feel I contributed to the incident because

I think thatcontributed when s/he.....

It would not have happened if I had

When I think back on what happened, I wish.....

Next time, something like this happens I will

Challenging the Negative De-catastrophising

This exercise is most appropriate for secondary learners and it will take approximately 20 minutes. Its effectiveness can be observed when the learner can talk through difficult situations, seeing positively how he/she can learn to cope with them.

Often, learners can ‘awfulise’ a situation. That is, the learner imagines the worst consequences possible – a trait that can persist into adult life. The individual looks at the world through a negative framework and can only see the worst outcomes – the glass is always half empty, never half full.

This exercise involves the adult choosing situations that the learner does not like and helping the learner imagine the worst outcomes that could possibly happen in those situations. The adult’s role is to bring a sense of perspective to the situation. Learners will often imagine consequences that are highly unlikely, unrealistic and even impossible. The type of difficult scenarios selected should be school based.

The practitioner helps the pupil choose a learning situation he/she does not like.

.....
.....

Explore with the learner the realistic consequences

What is the worst thing that could happen to you in this situation?

.....
.....
.....

and the best outcomes.

What would be the best thing that could happen to you?

.....
.....
.....

Try to bring out in reality what is the most likely outcome.

What do you think is most likely to happen?

.....
.....

.....
The resulting ways of coping with the situation may well lead into specific skills that the learner needs to either acquire or perform well.

If the worst thing happened - what could you do to cope?

.....
.....
.....

Positive thinking

This exercise is appropriate for all learners and it will take approximately 20 minutes. Its effectiveness is observed through learners being able to recall positive school-based memories, instead of negative ones.

There is a tendency for many learners to have an automatic negative framework that results in them always noticing failures, conflicts and/or unhappy times. This exercise helps them to think positively and reframe situations, so that 'I can't' becomes 'I will try', and 'I'm going to fail' becomes 'I will have a try'.

The practitioner enables the learner to complete the sentences presented below. If a sentence is too difficult for the learner then the practitioner quickly moves onto the next, trying to create a mental set of thinking positively. On completion, the practitioner can add any areas that are especially relevant for the individual pupil. The learner then chooses two or three sentences to remember and repeat to the adult on request.

Make a list of positive things about yourself

1. One thing I like about myself in school is
2. In school I look forward to
3. When I am at school I feel good about
4. A favourite school memory I have is
5. Something I do well in school is
6. A recent success I had in school was when I
7. I know I can
8. I am at my best when I
9. One of my best qualities is
10. Friends can rely on me to
11. My favourite school trip was
12. If I had to say one good thing about me, it is
13. A recent problem I solved was
14. A skill I have mastered is
15. People in school like it when I

Add more and help the learner choose two or three to practice each day.

CONCLUSION

Changing the core beliefs that a learner has is not an easy task and there is no quick fix solution. The choice of techniques used to improve a learner's self-belief will be dependent upon the individual's cognitive level of understanding. Developing a positive thinking style in a learner will be essential to enable him/her to cope with and hopefully overcome any problem behaviours.

Because the potential payoff--having students who value learning for its own sake--is priceless, it is crucial for school and home to devote themselves fully to encouraging, maintaining, and rekindling pupils' motivation to learn.

References

Hanko 1994 p 166

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