



# The stories we tell ourselves: The process of re-appraising our thoughts

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Have you ever had an interaction or experience that didn't feel good? Have you walked away and found yourself thinking constantly about it? Have you planned and re-planned what you would say or do if you could go back? Do you wake in the night and chew on the experience repeatedly, thinking and re-thinking about what happened? Do you tend to go to worst case scenario even without evidence to support it?

The truth is, we experience life based on our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours - our perceptions of the world around us. Unfortunately, we don't often take the time needed to recognize that our reactions are based on our own thoughts and feelings, not necessarily on what is true. We accept our experience as the true experience, and often suffer unnecessarily as a result. The good news is we can choose to re-appraise our thoughts and emotions, and thus, improve our experiences rather than ruminate on them.

There are a few steps in the process of re-appraisal that can help improve our experience.

## **1. What happened: who what where when?**

Take a moment to think through (or better yet, write down) exactly what happened. This is not your thoughts, interpretations, and feelings about the circumstances, but the objective facts. The simplest way to do this is think 'who what where when' and stick to the observable details of the event.

### **Example:**

My spouse is later coming home from work than is typical and he hasn't called or texted to let me know.

## **2. What is the story I'm telling myself?**

One of my favourite ways to preface my interpretation of the event is to say 'The story I'm telling myself is...' This simple phrase cues me to remember that the feelings, thoughts, and interpretations I have are simply that - a story. It is not observable fact. So, your next step is to write down your interpretation of the event. Start with the prompt 'The story I'm telling myself is...' and write down everything you are thinking and feeling. If you have a thought about what you assume the other person is thinking about you, write it down. If you feel distraught and worried that this means you will be fired, write it down.

Once you've written your story about the situation, take a moment to look through and identify the feelings and thoughts that emerge. You may want to use different coloured highlighters to identify thoughts and feelings. A feeling is usually one word (i.e., 'I feel angry.'). A thought is more complicated (i.e., 'I think that my coworker believes I'm incompetent at my job because of the way that he made that comment.')

### **Example:**

The story I'm telling myself is that the reason my spouse is late coming home from work is that he was in a car accident, and therefore he hasn't called or texted to let me know. He's probably at the hospital right now. I'll have to pick up the kids and find someone to take care of them so I can go to the hospital. What if he's not ok <insert anxiety rabbit hole here>... and if he is ok how could he possibly not message to tell me he's late <insert relationship pinch points here>. I guess he doesn't respect my time or care that this makes me worried. (And so on so forth). Maybe take a moment to write down the strongest



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feelings that arise when you tell yourself your story. In my example, I would probably have fear and anger on my list (fear of the worst case scenario and anger at the perception of disrespect and lack of communication).

### 3. What else is possible?

Now that you've established a) what happened and b) what you're thinking and feeling about what happened, your next step is to re-appraise through possibility seeking. Start with the prompt 'Is it possible...' and start writing down some alternate 'stories' that you could tell yourself.

#### Examples:

- Is it possible...that my spouse had a last minute urgent meeting at the end of the day and he wasn't able to give me a heads up?
- Is it possible...that he's already picked up the kids and they're playing at the park before heading home?
- Is it possible...that they stopped at the store on the way home?
- Is it possible...that he told me he was going to be later coming home today and I've forgotten?
- Is it possible...that traffic is bad and he's not able to let me know because he's choosing to be safe and not text while driving?
- Is it possible...that I'm responding with fear because I've been tired and stressed lately and my coping tools are lower than usual?
- Is it possible...that I'm reacting this way because of past experiences?
- Is it possible...that I forgot to tell him that I have a commitment to get to and it's important that he's home at a certain time? Is it possible I did, but he forgot?

- Is it possible that every other time he's been later than expected there was a good reason for it and he's arrived home safely?
- Is it possible...?

The purpose of this possibility processing is not to figure out exactly what is true, but to allow ourselves the opportunity to consider alternate possibilities. The purpose is to help us achieve a more balanced set of thoughts and feelings in our perception of the events happening around us. By exploring alternate possibilities, we naturally start to experience a decrease in the intensity of the feelings and thoughts that dominated our initial appraisal of the situation.

### 4. What is true?

Now that you've spent some time getting clarity what has happened, what your story is, and what some alternate possibilities might be, now you can spend some time getting clear on what is true. There is nothing wrong with experiencing the world through our thoughts and emotions, it's something that makes us human. But there is a problem when our thoughts and emotions take control of our experiences, and we find ourselves suffering as a result.

#### What is true?

- You had an experience.
- You had some thoughts and feelings in response.
- Feelings are true. There's no right or wrong feeling. But often the stories we tell ourselves (the thoughts we have) create very strong feelings that might be based more on the story and less on what happened.
- Now that you've gone through the process of re-appraisal, are there some feelings you can let go of or even feel a little less intensely?



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- Can you consider some thoughts (especially the worst-case scenario/anxiety driven ones) with more clarity and balance?

The hope is that through reappraisal we can disrupt some of the thought-feeling rabbit holes that we so often get pulled into. We can give ourselves some space to think about alternate possibilities that are more balanced, more forgiving and a little less intense. Perhaps the process allows us to mentally 'put down' the story so we no longer feel the need to ruminate excessively. Perhaps we can gain some insight into some of the stories that continually show up in our lives and explore some alternative thoughts and emotions that we feel more balanced in and in more control of.

Please reach out to the **BCPVPA EIP Program** if you would like some support and guidance around remaining professionally well.

Wishing you a sense of possibility as we lean into longer and brighter days this spring!

With respect and admiration,

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*Darby is a registered clinical counsellor who describes her work calling as 'caring for people who care for people' and has worked supporting leaders and workers in complex human serving systems (health care and education) for over a decade. She specifically supports teachers and school leaders at this time and finds deep joy and honour in her work.*

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