

Understanding our response to stress and adversity



Caught in a traffic jam, one person will honk the horn in anger, another will turn on some quiet music and just sit and wait, while still another will be flooded with anxiety about being late. Why do people have different reactions to adversity and stress?

Many of us believe that negative events cause us to act in certain ways. However, in Guide 1, we introduced a different reason for our reactions to adversity and stress. Research tells us that our reactions are based on our thoughts about the adversity.

When adversity happens, the first thing we try to do is explain to ourselves why it happened. Our beliefs about the cause of the adversity set off our reaction—how we feel and what we do.

The ABC model

Psychologist and researcher Dr. Albert Ellis created the ABC model to help us understand the meaning of our reactions to adversity:

A is the adversity—the situation or event.

B is our belief—our explanation about why the situation happened.

C is the consequence—the feelings and behaviours that our belief causes.

Adversity Beliefs Consequences

Here's an example:

Mary-Jo has been consciously living a healthy lifestyle for more than two months. She finds out that she wasn't invited to a party at school, but her friend Janice was invited. Mary-Jo thinks to herself, Janice always gets invited to things; I never do. I am such a loser—nobody likes me. She gets very sad, doesn't go out jogging, and eats a whole box of candy instead.



So what are the ABCs in this scenario?

Adversity= didn't get invited to the party to which her friend was invited

Beliefs= **"I am such a loser—nobody likes me."**

Consequences= feels sad, even depressed. Has no motivation to go jogging and eats a whole box of chocolates despite her focus on healthier living.

Here is another reaction:

Here's an ABC showing how another person, Anna, reacts to the same situation:

That's disappointing, but I actually don't know Nancy very well. Janice knows her far better. That's probably why I wasn't invited. Maybe next time I'll be invited. She goes for a run, stops at a video store to rent a new comedy, and calls a girlfriend to come and watch it.



The adversity (A) remains the same, but Anna's belief (B) is different. Thinking that she wasn't invited because **"I actually don't know Nancy very well"** helps Anna let go of initial feelings of disappointment, do things that help her feel more positive about herself, and enjoy the rest of the day (C). Using the ABC



model can help us develop key resilience abilities discussed in Guide 2, such as emotional regulation, impulse control, causal analysis, and empathy.

HOW TO USE THE ABC MODEL

Vividly recall a recent adverse event. After recording the A, fill in the C, then the B. Or, you might follow an ABC order. Choose the method that works best for you.

A: Describe the event objectively. Answer these questions: Who? What? Where? When?

B: Record your thoughts about the event. Why do you think it happened?

C: Record your feelings and actions.

B-C connections

Drs. Karen Reivich and Andrew Shatté, authors of *The Resilience Factor*, have created a useful tool to help people identify their beliefs when they are doing the ABC model. The tool, shown in the following chart, outlines the links between specific beliefs and emotions that people predictably and universally experience. The authors of the “B-C Connections” have charted only the “negative” emotions, as they are commonly the ones we experience in times of adversity.

COMMON B-C CONNECTIONS

Beliefs	Consequences (emotions)
violation of our rights	→ anger
actual loss or loss of self-worth	→ sadness, depression
future threat	→ anxiety, fear
violation of another's rights	→ guilt
loss of standing with others	→ embarrassment

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The chart shows that if we believe that our rights have been violated—for example, if we think that we’ve been treated unjustly or disrespectfully—this will lead to feelings of anger. A belief involving loss causes sadness, perhaps even depression. A belief that something negative is going to happen (future threat) leaves us feeling anxious and fearful.

How can we use the B-C connections to identify our beliefs?

Sometimes it’s hard to identify our beliefs; we often have more experience labelling our feelings. The B-C connections can be used in reverse to help us identify our beliefs. For example, feelings of guilt are often aroused when we believe that we have violated another person’s rights. We feel embarrassed if we believe that we have lost standing in another’s eyes. B-C connections help us increase our self-awareness—an important first step to a resilient response to adversity.

Refer to Section 2, “Helping Children Become More Resilient,” for information about using B-C connections with children.

Please visit www.reachinginreachingout.com, the RiRO website, for a brief video on the ABC model (Skills Video 2).

What do teachers say about using the ABC model and B-C connections?

Using the ABC model helped me recognize my automatic thoughts when I’m upset, mad, etc. It helped me look at things more positively. It led to looking for alternatives to solve the problem and helped me be calmer in a situation that is hard to handle. —YZ (kindergarten)

The ABC model allows me to be reflective about my responses. —TH (supervisor)

Using the process of thinking through what the problem is, step by step, helps me know more exactly what my beliefs are. It simplifies things. —KH (kindergarten-preschool)



Summary

Understanding our response to stress and adversity

Why do people have different reactions to adversity and stress?

Our beliefs or thoughts about adversity cause our reactions—how we feel and what we do in stressful situations.

Psychologist Dr. Albert Ellis developed the ABC model to help us understand the connection between adversity (A), our beliefs (B), and our emotional and behavioural responses (C).

Adversity Beliefs Consequences (feelings and actions)

Sometimes our beliefs about a situation are not accurate, and our reactions undermine resilient responses.

We can use the ABC model to identify our beliefs and, if necessary, challenge whether they are true.

Using B-C connections can help us identify our beliefs. If we know what our emotional reactions are, we can identify what types of beliefs we may have, e.g., sadness = loss; anxiety = future threat; anger = violation of our rights.

COMMON B-C CONNECTIONS

Beliefs

Consequences (emotions)

violation of our rights actual	→	anger
loss or loss of self-worth future	→	sadness, depression
threat violation of another's	→	anxiety, fear
rights loss of standing with	→	guilt
others	→	embarrassment

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