

RESOLVING COMMON NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Dr. O. Carl Simonton has always emphasized the role of emotions in the healing process and how to understand and manage them. All emotions play important roles in our lives, and therefore all emotions are “good.” When we call some of them “negative,” we don’t mean “bad.” What we mean is that they motivate us to avoid, withdraw, harm, destroy or act in another way that in the long run may interfere with our quality of life, cause chronic distress and/or are experienced as unpleasant. Still, however unpleasant, any single experience of any of these emotions by itself is not harmful, and therefore no emotion needs to be avoided or feared. This chapter is not an instruction in avoiding negative emotions or suppressing them, as this would not be healthy or possible. This chapter, rather, explains how we create some of our negative emotions and how they get reinforced and may become chronic, dysfunctional habits. Finally, we show ways how to resolve these chronic patterns of distress and develop new, healthy emotional responses, which, with practice, can become healthy emotional habits reducing stress and increasing the joy of life.

As we have explained in the first class in ABCDs of Emotions, it is not events that create our emotional feelings; it is our thoughts, beliefs and attitudes that fuel our emotional feelings. The most effective way of dealing with any negative or distressing emotion is by doing written Belief Work (adopted from Maxie C. Maultsby, Jr., MD) as described on pages 9-13 of this workbook (or <http://bit.ly/BeliefWork>). Just as a reminder, here is the way to assess if our thinking is healthy.

Five Rules for Healthy Thinking:

1. Healthy thoughts and beliefs are based on facts.
2. Healthy thoughts and beliefs protect our lives and health.
3. Healthy thoughts and beliefs help us achieve our short and long term goals.
4. Healthy thoughts and beliefs help us resolve or avoid our most unwanted conflicts with others.
5. Healthy thoughts and beliefs help us feel the way we want to feel without abusing drugs or other substances.

❖ Healthy thoughts and beliefs:

- Obey at least three of the five rules.
- What is healthy thinking for me does not have to be healthy for another person.
- What is healthy for me today does not have to be healthy for me at other times.

- All the rules are equally important.
- Some rules may not be applicable in certain situations.

Below there is a general discussion of the most common negative emotions like worry and anxiety, anger, resentment and guilt that may be helpful, but still doesn't replace the short- and long-term effectiveness of Belief Work.

Worry

Fear is important for our survival, and if you see a big truck speeding in your direction, just jump away instead of doing belief work ;) But most of the fears, anxieties and worries that modern people experience are happening in the virtual realities of their minds, and most often don't refer to immediate objective threats. Worry and anxiety are examples of using your imagination in unhealthy ways. A healthy way of using your imagination is by imagining a desirable outcome. When we worry, however, we imagine undesirable outcomes.

Mark Twain once said that he had *lived through a lot of terrible things, but fortunately most of them never happened*. It's a very important insight. Few people have such an acute understanding of this issue. First, when we worry, we indeed live through a lot of terrible things. Yes, when we imagine terrible things happening, we feel as bad as if they had already happened. For instance, a mother worrying about her daughter not being home after curfew imagines all the worst scenarios. She feels almost as bad as if she had already received the phone call from the hospital emergency room about her daughter having an accident. She doesn't get such a phone call, but her imagination can go on and on and on and on. She can relive it multiple, multiple, multiple times. So, through our worry we are reliving that imagined trouble. It hasn't happened yet and may never happen, but we live through the same thing multiple times putting our minds and bodies through the stress comparable in intensity if the event really took place. That is a very important insight confirmed by science. Psychologists as far back as Pavlov observed that the words that we think can substitute for any real stimulus. Modern scientific experiments confirm that what we imagine has as strong physiologic effect as what we experience in real life.

The second part of Mark Twain statement, I lived through a lot of terrible things *but fortunately, most of them never happened* also presents an important insight. How many mothers, percentage wise, do you think are worrying about their daughters when they are not home on time? I didn't check the statistics, but I would assume that it would be a significant number.

Now, what percent of all of the daughters that were late for curfew were actually late because they were in an accident or some other terrible thing that happened? Or, how

many times as a teenager were you not home past curfew and what percentage of it because of some serious accident? Not very many.

So, when we worry we are living through these things that rarely, if ever, happen. What is more likely to happen? The daughter has a lot of friends, and she is just having a good time. “You didn’t even call!” you say. The daughter knows not to call because she is having a good time. She knew if she called, it would be really difficult to have a good time because the mother knows what to say in order for the daughter to stop having a good time. Remember when you came back home late, the most frequent reason was you were having a good time.

You imagine all possible terrible things that may happen to you that you have heard of, read about, or watched on TV. Most likely most of them are never going to happen. Healthy thinking is not based on possibility but on the probability what is likely, not that all is possible.

Daughter is still not home. Mother worries and imagines the worst scenarios. Even if the daughter is late not because she’s having fun (which is the most likely), she probably ran into common issues, such as a flat tire, the car not starting, or a missed bus. And indeed the research shows, that when we worry we imagine the consequences of the things we worry about as worse and more costly than the reality eventually shows.

In addition, worry is a self-reinforcing process. What is the first thing that the mother feels when she sees her daughter walking through the door? Relief. Exactly. So as we already mentioned, when we worry, the things that we worry about most frequently don’t happen, so most frequently what we experience is relief from our own worry. When our brains produce worry eventually our brains get a treat in the form of relief and the brains assume, “Wow! Worry is good.”

In addition to this relief, we get a mistaken idea that worry is somehow protective, because as we have established before, the things we worry about usually don’t happen. So it is easy for our brain to assume “whenever I worry, the bad things don’t happen and I get a treat!” So we start believing that worry protects us from the things that we worry about. In addition, our culture further reinforces this with an attitude that *worry is what responsible people do* to avoid bad things from happening. And we all want to be responsible people and do a responsible thing and as a result we worry.

If we don’t worry, we may not only be perceived as irresponsible but also as not caring. Worry even becomes a very frequent way of expressing love – “Oh, honey, I worried so much about you.” Sometimes it is the only way of expressing love. Look at all the deceptive but harmful rewards of worry:

- Illusion of protection from unwanted events
- Illusion of doing something responsible
- Illusion that you are expressing true love

- Your body is mobilized via sympathetic nervous system for flight or fight (but there is no need for this mobilization and it is just an unnecessary stress)
- Even though a certain event could happen only once (like death), you can worry about it thousands of times and reliving it by putting your mind and body through this virtual experience
- Real and pleasant to your brain, relief associated with the dose of oxytocin, but from an illusory perspective that you (or your loved one) avoided some threat (which existed only in your head).

After attending this session or reading this chapter, next time your daughter is late you may know it is because most likely she is having a lot of fun – will you still worry? Yes, most likely you will. What you will you be thinking as a parent? Still most likely: “Oh, something bad happened.” It’s already a very deeply conditioned habitual thinking. In order to replace this habit, you need to practice new way of thinking “while it is possible that something bad happened, it is not likely; healthy thinking is based on probability not possibility; so most likely she is having fun.” Practice in your imagery by thinking how your daughter is having safe fun and arriving safely home.

Be energy efficient – trust

Worry and fear live in some imagined future that does not exist and most likely won’t ever exist outside of our minds. So we can come back to here and now with conscious breathing. We can tell ourselves “in” when we breathe and “out” when we breathe out, and reminding ourselves to think about what is most likely – “She is having a lot of fun”.

Worry and fear ruin our quality of life, damage our relationships, and cost us a lot of energy. And we can’t enjoy our evening because our daughter is late.

When you worry you can’t enjoy your life because we are not really living our lives. You are living in some unlikely internal reality that you created in your head that does not exist and most likely will never happen, as we have learned so far. The things that we worry about usually don’t happen and even on rare occasions that they do happen, the consequences or costs of these things are imagined as worse and more painful than they turn out to be.

So how to deal with it? Just to say “don’t worry baby” doesn’t stop the fear. Trust stops the fear.

Now, let’s translate these observations into health and illness. When you are diagnosed with cancer or another significant illness, your imagination goes wild. You come to my office very worried. I take a sample of your blood and put it in this special supercomputer with attachments on it, lab work that can analyze all the data and some program that it can give you a 100% certain diagnosis and prognosis that is specific for you and 100% guaranteed.

Beat the Odds®: A Comprehensive Cancer Survivorship Program

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Let's assume that you believe that 100%. We take this blood sample and watch the computer and then the printout comes out saying that: You are going to recover from this illness; The treatment is going to be successful; You are going to live a long and happy life; You are going to fulfill all your dreams, see your children and grandchildren growing happy, healthy and prosperous. If you believed that, "Wow, I'm not going to die anytime soon, I am not going to suffer, my family is going to be OK, finances will be good. I'm going to live a long happy life, and I'm going to die happy and healthy, surrounded by people who love me, with peace of mind." If you really sincerely believed it, had no doubt in your mind, had full faith in it, absolutely trusted that result, how would you feel? Would you still worry? No. Your full trust in the results would make any worry impossible.

If you still think that you still would worry, that means that you wouldn't fully trust that printout and its 100% guarantee. If you truly believe in it, you won't have any doubts in it, and then your worry is gone.

So, a month later, you come back to my office, and I ask you, "How have you been doing?" "Fantastic. I haven't worried at all. It's wonderful. I'm so happy." So how is your quality of life? "Oh, my quality of life improved. I was able to do a lot of fun stuff, and be more productive. And the kids and my wife like me much more. I also noticed that people like to be around me."

Then I say, "Oh, I'm so happy for you, but you know what? We are going to refund you for your last visit and today's visit too because I didn't know that there is a glitch in this computer, all right? Indeed the computer manufacturer cannot really guarantee the results of the printout. So you are back to square one, not knowing the future."

Now the question is "would you have lost anything in believing me even though I was wrong?"

"No."

"Would you have gained anything by worrying all that time?"

"No."

"Would you have gained anything by not worrying?"

"A month of peace of mind."

And, you know what? When you are really worried sick, even a few moments of peace of mind are great.

What does that tell us? It tells us that we are built to trust. Because when we trust, we feel good. So we are hardwired to trust even when we don't have the evidence. So we are better off trusting than doubting. Our emotional guidance system (or emotional GPS or emotional navigational system) tells us that when we do compassionate, kind, gentle things, we feel good. When we trust, we also feel good. When we engage in things that are part of our nature or that bring us back to our nature (the vital activities that increase joy, meaning, and deep fulfillment), we feel good because we are hard-wired that way. We are hard-wired to trust.

Doubt, on the other hand, is seductive. We are in a culture of doubting. So we are conditioned to doubt whatever we are told. Sometimes you may hear hopeful information, but you feel worse. Why do you feel worse? Because you immediately doubt that information.

But we are very keen at finding what is wrong with us, even though we are hard-wired and created to trust. By definition trust is reliance, confidence, resting of your mind. That's why faith is defined as profound trust. Trust and faith are antidotes for fear and worry.

But trust responsibly. We need to trust things that stand the test of time, unlike my super-computer. What is left to trust that stands the test of time? Nature. Really getting connected with our nature and our beliefs about who we are by nature and the nature of our universe. Trust the universe. Trust without attachment to the outcome. Yet, trust responsibly. As the old Arab saying goes, "Trust God but tie your camel to a tree." We need to do our part to our best abilities, and according to the principle of the cause and effect, assure that the causes we are working on are going to bring the effects we want. Similarly, we cannot expect achieving different effects, if we keep doing what we've been doing. And remember when trusting people, trust their fallible nature – otherwise you set yourself up for disappointment.

Homework:

Worry Resolution – Step by Step

When habitual worriers write down their thoughts for belief work, they list a lot of "what if...?" Questions (questions they never answer). We encourage them to find beliefs underlying these rhetorical questions. The steps below will help you address these worries and beliefs in a direct way.

Ask yourself and honestly answer in writing the six questions below (adopted from Neil Fiore, 2007) and follow the rest of instruction steps:

- 1. What am I so afraid of? What is the worst thing that may happen?** Most people imagine consequences of the things they worry about as worse than they could be in reality. Frequently, they are even too afraid "to go there" in their imaginations. By asking these questions, you can rationally explore your fears,

recognize realistic threats and dismiss those which are possible but unlikely. Remember, healthy thinking is based on probability not possibility.

2. What would I do, if the worst really happened? It is important to focus on your own actions but it is also appropriate to ask for help, involve and expand your support system.

- Where I could turn for help and support?
- Who are the people that can genuinely support me but are not too attached to my outcome? Those closest to you may be too attached to your outcome and also very affected by your misfortune. Don't forget about professional help.
- How I could cope with the situation? Think of your own, personal resources and examples how you successfully dealt with adversities in the past.
- What would I hope for and how could I strengthen and protect my hopefulness?
- And then, what would I do? – keep asking yourself this question until you run out of probable scenarios (don't try all *possible* scenarios; just what is likely (if Murphy's Law was accurate – “anything that can go wrong, will go wrong” – we would not survive a day on this planet).
- How could I survive the crisis? What could I do to get through the crises, even if I can't or don't know how to improve it? **Use Distress Tolerance Skills AC(C)CEPTS** (modified from Marsha Linehan):

- **A**ctivities to distract yourself – Get involved in activities that engage your attention away from your problem like reading, taking a walk, window shopping, watching your favorite show on TV, browsing the internet, etc. Don't forget Vital Activities you listed in class 1.
- **C**ontribute – get involved in helping others. Do something nice to pleasantly surprise someone.
- **C**heer up others – trying to support others in similar situations may help you. For example, contribute to a blog on what works for you in the time of crisis
- **C**ompare yourself with others in similar situations and how they survived such crises. What can you learn from their lessons?
- **o**pposite **E**motions – watch funny or silly movies, go to a comedy or improv club, play with your pets. Play (experience having fun) – use the Play List on page 43. Practice Unconditioned Laughter.
- **P**ushing Away the crisis – take a mental or real vacation from your problem. Schedule time to think about your problem and deal with it – don't think about it outside of the scheduled time. Use thought stopping if the thoughts of your problems intrude. If the thoughts still intrude, write them down as you do on the left side of Belief

Work, and come back to finish them only on the scheduled time for problems.

- **Thoughts** – in emergencies or when Pushing Away doesn't work, start involving your mind with busy but neutral thoughts. For instance, count to 10 and back, name the months of the year and back, recite poetry, sing, solve crossword puzzles or Sudoku or read – anything that may help keep your mind involved in subjects not related to your pain. Mindful breathing and thinking “in,” when you breathe in and thinking “out,” when you breathe out also works.
 - **Sensations** – engaging your senses of touch, taste, smell, hearing, and vision. You can use whatever is more appropriate.
 - ✓ **Flooding** – just flood your senses with intense sensations – put an icepack on your neck, put your headphones with loud music (and dance to it), eat something very spicy, take a cold shower, etc. Flooding sensations works best for emergencies.
 - ✓ **Self-soothing** – engaging your senses in something kind, gentle, nurturing, comforting. Get a massage, take a bubble bath, listen to beautiful music, look at beautiful scenery (or photos), go bird watching, watch the sunset, smell the roses, be mindful of the smells and sounds of nature that surrounds you, cook and/or eat your favorite dish, make yourself a cup of tea and mindfully drink it involving all your senses, etc.
 - If you worry about the recurrence of cancer, then re-read the beginning of Chapter 4 on Stress (page 22) where we discuss what to do in such a case.
- 3. How could I deal with the consequences of the worst thing happening?**
- What could I do to protect myself, my loved ones and the quality of my life?
 - What could I do to lessen the physical and emotional pain in this situation?
 - What could I do to keep me going?
 - How can I still bring joy to my life?
- 4. What alternatives would I have?**
- Did I consider even those that seem difficult to accept now?
 - Have I been too attached to the outcome and have I set myself up to accept only the most desirable?
 - Did I demand for the life to be exactly as I wanted it to be for my happiness?
 - Can I be happy in other ways that I envisioned?

5. **What I can do NOW to decrease the odds of undesirable outcomes?** If you come up with some ideas, schedule a time and a place for you to take action on these ideas.
6. **What can I do NOW to increase the odds of achieving what I desire?** If you come up with some ideas here as well, schedule a time and a place for you to take action on these ideas.
7. **Review the answers** that you wrote for the questions above. Check if they contain healthy beliefs (obey at least 3 of the 5 Rules for Healthy Thinking). If you find any unhealthy ones, correct them. Now you have your “insurance plan” for the worst case scenario. Remember, being prepared for it, doesn’t mean that the worst scenarios will actually happen – healthy hope gives us courage to look at them.
8. Questions 6 and 7 bring you back to the reality of the **present moment**, which usually is not as bad as the worriedly imagined future. Remember, if something is not happening now, it is not happening. Your imagination can trick you into reacting to the above scenarios, as if they really were happening. Still, our minds, with some training, allow us to enjoy today, even if we know of some certain and unavoidable suffering tomorrow. So why ruin today with undesirable imagery?
9. **Imagine desirable outcomes but without attachment.** Just put yourself in the state of relaxation, resting in the present moment and imagine what you desire and how you can get there. Strengthen your hope – the belief that desirable things can be obtained regardless of the remoteness of the probabilities. You can go back to Chapter 2 on Imagery (page 14) and Chapter 3 on Hope (page 17) to refresh your memory on the subject.

If you still have difficulty trusting the natural laws of universe, just realize that the future that you worry about is as realistic as the most ideal future that you can imagine. Both are just figments of your imagination, and both do not exist in the objective reality and possibly never will.

Trust in the universe but sometimes the universe will not do things that we want. When we are experiencing distress because the universe is not doing things when we want them, it is impatience. When we are upset that the universe is not doing the things that it should do, it is usually called anger. If you don’t like the word anger, you can call it fits of idealism (more on that in the next part on anger, resentment and guilt).

Anger, Resentment and Guilt

Anger in itself is not a bad emotion. Anger has a significant role in protecting us and in alerting us that something is threatening us or our values and mobilizes energy for counter-attack. However, anger is also what ruins our relationships and our lives. We also do not like admitting that we are angry. Instead, we use euphemisms such as aggravated, frustrated, anxious, etc. We are ashamed of being angry, so frequently we deny it: “What!? Me angry!?” With anger, as with any other emotion, it is important to uncover the underlying belief driving this emotion and to apply at least three of the five rules for healthy thinking to assess the health value of this belief. If it is not healthy, then we need to change it to a healthy one.

The following discussion is based on the teachings of Dr. Maxie C. Maultsby, Jr., and refers primarily to the application of the first rule of healthy thinking: “Healthy thinking is based on facts.” Facts are part of nature. And we want our thinking to be in harmony with nature because our own nature drives our healing systems. Therefore, we want to resolve issues of anger in a natural way, not by denying or suppressing it. The most frequent, but unhealthy way of dealing with anger, is feeling angry but not showing it. Here we teach how to prevent anger from arising, or if we are already angry, how not to fuel it and eventually stop creating it.

In the approach presented here, we recognize that we are creating our anger with our own thoughts, beliefs and attitudes. The problem with anger is that

Anger is also self-reinforcing:

- Anger feels “right.” When we are angry, we have no doubts.
- Anger energizes us. When we are angry, we feel better than when we feel depressed, or in despair, or worried.
- We have clear solutions to the problem at hand. We know “who done it and who is going to pay.”
- When angry, we sometimes get what we want by intimidating people. It is a type of intermittent schedule of reinforcement (like gambling – winning some of the times) and hard to extinguish.
- Anger is a moral emotion. It is communicating our values with **Righteous Indignation**. It is common in politics because it energizes “like-minded people.”
- Idealists have **fits of idealism** – an experience of an emotional distress when the universe is not adhering to their ideals.

Not surprisingly, **anger is only the second emotion to joy that mentally healthy, intelligent people like to maintain**. So usually when we get angry, we stay angry as long as we think angry thoughts. A lot of people try to remove themselves from the situation “that made them angry.” But, as we know from ABCDs of Emotions, nothing makes us angry – we make ourselves angry with our thoughts beliefs and attitudes.

We experience anger when things are happening that we don't want to happen or the things that we want don't happen. But of course from the age of 3 we learn that we are not gods and we don't always get whatever we want. So, we learn to hide our ideals (wants, demands, wishes, preferences, and values) behind the word "*should*," as if there was some universal law stating that the universe and people inhabiting it *should* function according to our ideals. It does not mean that those things are not important, but when you state things *should* be exactly in agreement to your values, it is putting unrealistic demands on the universe and people.

We are all conditioned to use the word "*should*" judgmentally in a moralistic, absolutistic, idealistic way. It is our very strong habit. Using the word "*should*" in a non-judgmental way would feel weird, unnatural, and even wrong (so called cognitive-emotive dissonance) like anything that is in conflict with our old habits (for example, driving in England for the first time). So, you most likely will experience this "feeling wrong" when you read what follows.

Questions about Anger

Have you ever been angry when you honestly believed that everything went exactly as it *should* have gone? Have you ever been angry when you honestly believed that nothing was happening that *shouldn't* be happening? Of course not.

You most likely were in situations that initially you thought were not the way they *should* be and got angry, but then realized that you were mistaken, everything was OK and you calmed down. How long does it take your anger to disappear? When you realize that you are mistaken, and that in fact everything is the way it *should* be?

Let me give you an example. Imagine that you are driving down a one-way street behind a big truck. You are in a hurry. The truck stops suddenly without giving any signal. The truck is in the middle of the street, so there is not enough space for you to pass it on either side. There are cars behind you and you cannot back out of this one way street. You are too sophisticated to honk so, you get out of your car, walk towards the cabin of the truck to deliver your brilliant line spiced with sarcasm and invectives. You see the driver, and you are just about to open your mouth but suddenly you notice kindergarteners lining up in pairs and slowly crossing the street. Do you still want to yell your insults at the truck driver? Most likely you are relieved that you didn't open your mouth. Would you still be angry at the driver? Not anymore most likely. Where did your anger go? How long did it take for your anger to disappear? Most likely only an instant; with a speed of thought that it takes to change your mind from "he *shouldn't* be blocking the street" to "everything is the way it *should* be, and he *should* have stopped; what a nice guy!"

In situations like this, anger immediately and effortlessly disappears. You don't have to pretend that you are not angry, or try to suppress or hide it. You simply stopped creating

anger. Anger disappears in the instant that you change your mind and understand that everything is the way it *should* be.

You may be saying now that it is indeed easy not to get angry and calm down when everything is the way it *should* be. So, wouldn't you like to have a guarantee that for the rest of your life everything is always going to be the way it *should* be and nothing will ever happen that *shouldn't* happen?

Universal Principle

It is not your ideals, values, demands and other moralistic *shoulds* that drive this universe. What drives this universe is the principle of cause and effect. According to this principle, if something happens, it *should* be happening because its causes led it to happen, and that not enough happened that would have prevented it from happening. According to the cause and effect principle, if something happens, it *should* be happening. It has to happen.

Now you realize that according to the cause and effect principle, everything is always exactly the way it *should* be. By making this statement that everything is always the way it *should* be, we do not judge whether an event is "good" or "bad." We only recognize the fact that everything was in line for this to happen and not enough obstacles to prevent it from happening. This does not mean that we like it or that we condone it. Or that it is fair and moral. We just recognize the facts and accept them the way they are. It also does not mean that we *should* give up on our own ideals and values. It only means that if you want to put your values into action and you don't want this thing from happening in the future, then you need to work on causes to succeed in preventing it from happening again.

If anything happens, it *should* be happening. Therefore, practically everything always happens that *should* be happening, and nothing ever happens that *should* not be happening because the causes for that lie in the past. We cannot change the past; however, we can change the causes of future events. We can prevent at least some things from happening if we don't want them to happen.

Coming back to the truck driver that stopped in the middle of a one-way street, imagine that you walk forward and you don't see anything blocking his road. You simply see him having a chit-chat with a parked cab driver. *Should* he have stopped? Yes. He pressed the brakes and put the car in parking gear. *Should* he have signaled to stop? No, his brain did not direct him to do it. *Should* he chit-chat with the cab driver? Yes, if his brain directs him to do it, and his beliefs support that it is appropriate, he *should* be doing just that. Do you like it? Of course you don't. But there's no reason for us to get upset about something just because we don't like it. We don't have to get angry. [But if we do, we *should* ;).]

So, from a healthy, factual stand point, not only nothing will ever happen in your life that *shouldn't* happen, but also everything is always going to be the way it *should*. This also applies to your past: nothing has ever happened in your life that *shouldn't* and everything has always been the way it *should*. Yes, many of things that happened to you might have been very painful, tragic, or morally very wrong, but if they happened they *should* have happened. If you take this paragraph out of context and present to a person who suffered a lot of trauma and abuse, it may be very invalidating. In such situation we have a “gut reaction” to protest and yell that such trauma and abuse “shouldn't have happened to anybody; nobody *should* suffer so much!” This would be responding from our well-conditioned habit of moralistic, absolutistic and idealistic use of the word *should*. Still, despite how morally wrong and unfair these things were, if they happened, they *should* indeed have happened.

Is Healthy Use of “Should” Moral?

When I (Mariusz) ran groups with Washington, D.C. prisoners in Lorton, whose children often fought in opposing gangs, I was frequently asked, “*Should* children kill children?” Clearly, the moral judgment says “Absolutely no!!” The fact is that gun violence among children in some neighborhoods in the USA continues despite our idealistic proclamations. If children are raised in an environment where violence is the primary way of solving problems, where violent people have most power, “respect,” and money, where the operating agenda is “kill or be killed,” and where children have easier access to guns than wise parental guidance or nutritious meals, where many decisions are made under the influence, then tragedies are bound to happen. And when one child pulls the trigger of the loaded gun aimed at another child and the bullet goes through vital organs of this other child and damages them entirely, then that child has to die, will die, and *should* die.

The trouble is, that those who want to resolve the problem of child gun violence (and other complex social problems), frequently are idealists. They have relatively clear ideals in their minds (and hearts) of how things *should* be, but they are rejecting objective reality as morally “bad and unacceptable” and the causes that lead to it. These idealists cannot effectively address the problem because the resolution of any problem starts first with honest acceptance of the problem with all the causes that lead to it. Only after acceptance, can we address the causes and prevent the problem from occurring again, or more accurately, decrease the probability of it occurring again.

If we use *should* in a healthy way, then we won't get angry as often. Others, not knowing this principle may accuse us of not caring about the “cause” if we don't show anger at the problem. Healthy use of the word *should* leads to the recognition of the reality of the problem with its complex causes. This immediately puts our minds in a problem-solving mode. And from the point of view of effective problem resolution, **it is much more morally valuable than “righteous indignation” and pulpit thumping** for immediate gain and social approval.

So, by saying that “everything is always the way it *should* be and nothing is ever the way it *shouldn't be*” we are not condoning it, agreeing with it, forgetting about it or absolving the responsible party to pay the consequences. We are simply recognizing that it is what it is without putting a moral judgment on it. This is also called *radical* or *unconditional* acceptance.

Paradox of Acceptance and Change

To a certain extent idealists are like people who drive with only the screen of their final (or ideal) destination on their GPS. And, let's say they want to go to Santa Monica, but end up in Pasadena. They are in Pasadena, but the GPS screen shows Santa Monica, so they throw an angry tantrum that “We *should* be in Santa Monica, not Pasadena!” and may blame GPS, street signs, people who gave them directions and other things for being lost. Yet, the healthiest way to deal with this is to unconditionally accept the fact that they are in Pasadena, rather than waste time and energy on finding who to blame. The next step is to switch the screen to the current location, and let the GPS “recalculate” the new route. And then follow the directions step by step. So, **in order to change, it is important to first unconditionally accept where you are, and then find your way to where you want to be.**

The same applies to wanting to change yourself: first is Unconditional Self-Acceptance (USA), then changing what we want to change. Unconditional Self-Acceptance allows us to be honest with ourselves rather than punishing ourselves with guilt and blame.

Albert Ellis said that “on one hand people say they can't change themselves, but insist on changing others.” Here, we can practice Unconditional Others-Acceptance rather than harboring resentment or hatred.

The radical acceptance and the non-judgmental stance is opposite to our habits. We have all been conditioned to use moralistic *shoulds* whenever things don't go our way. The best recommended course of action is to give up the use of *shoulds* entirely. “Simply don't *should* all over yourself,” as Albert Ellis used to say.

This section may have given you some insight on a different way of thinking about anger but this insight alone is not going to help you much in decreasing your anger. Similarly, just by the insight that the British drive on the left side of the road won't allow you to drive comfortably in the UK. To replace old habits, insight is not enough - practice is necessary. But, as driving in the UK may initially feel weird, awkward, unnatural and wrong, using healthy *shoulds*, which are in conflict with your conditioned habits, will initially feel weird, awkward, unnatural and wrong. However, you know that even if driving on the left feels wrong it is the right thing to do. Here too using healthy *shoulds* may feel wrong, but is the right thing to do. Finally, as with driving on the left in the UK, the use of healthy *shoulds*, with practice, will become a new habit.

Practicing Healthy Emotions

As long as you are in UK and have a car, you can practice driving on the left as much as you want. Opposite is true, when practicing calm emotions (or being less upset) in situations that we habitually got very angry before. Real life doesn't give us enough opportunities to practice our desirable emotions because when opportunity happens, usually we are not prepared and forget about practice and end up reacting in the habitual way (in result practicing old behaviors we want to change). It is like demanding from an athlete to have the peak form and performance at competitions without any time for practice.

Fortunately, Dr. Maxie C. Maultsby, Jr. introduced imagery (Rational Emotive Imagery) as the form of mental practice for desirable emotions. Yes, exactly the same process Dr. O. Carl Simonton used for changing our attitudes about cancer and its treatment (coincidentally they independently did it in 1971). As we know from the discussion on worry and Mark Twain's insights, our brain and body doesn't know the difference between imagined and real world. So, **we can practice our desirable emotions in undesirable situations as much as we want just by using mental imagery.**

In the case of resolving anger you may imagine yourself in the situation that you habitually get angry or the last situation you did. But this time you imagine yourself calm and composed by thinking according to healthy *shoulds*. It is recommended to practice several times a day by first relaxing yourself with three-six breathing exercises (which means three seconds of breathing in and six seconds of breathing out). Do several cycles of such breathing, and you will see how relaxed you become. Then, continue breathing in this relaxing way and use your Universally Calming Perspective. You may write your own healthy *shoulds* script and record it and play for your mental practice.

Universally Calming Perspective:

Everything is always the way it should be,
Even though this event is different from what I wanted to see,
Until I can change it to the way I want it to be,
I shall keep myself pleasantly calm naturally.
With a warm, soft smile on my face, I shall continue to breathe at my slow relaxing pace,
Until I am as pleasantly calm, naturally,
As I now think is healthiest for me.
Everything is always exactly as it now should and has to be,
Even though the situation is not, what I wanted for me.
But I am not God,
And, there is no objective reason why I should always get what I want.
So until I can change it, I can calmly accept everything as it is, and therefore, should be.

Healthy vs. Unhealthy “Shoulds”	
MORALISTIC/IDEALISTIC/ABSOLUTISTIC UNHEALTHY “SHOULDs”	REALISTIC/FACTUAL HEALTHY “SHOULDs”
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Refer to what is not real now. 2. Reflect your opinion that what is right for you should be right for everyone else. 3. Are magical and are based on the belief that things should happen just because you sincerely want or demand them to happen. 4. Lead to inappropriate anger about the fact that you or someone else either could not or just did not do what was necessary to give you what you wanted. 5. Create personal confusion that can prevent you from doing things needed to meet your short and long-term goals. 6. Lead to intolerance and chauvinism and are based on a belief that everybody should behave, think, look, etc. the way one believes is right. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Refer to what is real now. 2. Are factual, recognize that what's desirable for you is often undesirable for other people. 3. Are based on objective facts and the idea that things happen only when first have occurred events that were necessary to make them happen. 4. Lead to calm corrective action after you or someone else either could not or just did not do what was necessary to give you what you wanted. 5. Create clarity that directs you to take actions needed to meet your short and long-term goals. 6. Teach tolerance by revealing that most people do not act according to our values and beliefs, but according to their own values and beliefs and it should be this way (that is how our brains work).

Guilt and Resentment

- Guilt and resentment are the sides of the same coin. Resentment is a chronic anger directed at others and guilt is a chronic anger directed at self.
- It is very important that we are capable of feeling guilt because it helps us follow accepted rules, stick to our own values and honor our commitments. This works similarly to pain, which warns and tells us not to do certain things. Lack of capacity to feel pain (like for example in leprosy) leads to a lot of injuries and severe complications. Lack of capacity to feel guilt may lead to severe personality disturbances with antisocial and sociopathic behaviors (including lack of remorse).

- It is healthy to have remorse, to recognize that certain things we did were wrong and to keep the resolve never to do anything like that in the future. However, staying in the continuous state of guilt, being consumed by it, is not healthy.
- Guilt is saying to oneself “I shouldn’t have done this” or “I should have done that.”
- If you punish a child who voluntarily admitted to breaking something, she will not admit to it in the future and possibly will continue the behavior, but now behind your back. If you, however, create a safe, nonjudgmental space for the child to talk about her mistakes and consistently reward her honesty, you will allow for an honest relationship to grow.
- Guilt is punishment that we deliver to ourselves for recognized mistakes. It comes from the misguided idea that if we keep punishing ourselves, somehow it is going to make us better people. On the other hand, we know that the punishment doesn’t usually prevent future undesirable behaviors, but rather leads to dishonesty and continuation of these behaviors in hiding. In the case of excessive guilt we are becoming dishonest with ourselves and hide this deception. Resolving guilt and shame is the important way to stop any self-deception and to start honestly looking at own behavior.
- We all are **right** in our own minds. We only hold in our minds beliefs that we consider to be right and immediately reject those that we consider to be wrong. Similarly we do things that, at the moment of committing them, seem to be right.
- Yes, today we see that what we did was wrong. Of course, hindsight is 20/20, but requiring ourselves to act in the past with the knowledge that we have today is demanding an impossible thing. Our minds are not wired like that.
- Similarly I cannot act today with the knowledge that I will have even a week from now. What would I do if I could act today with the knowledge that I will have a week from now? I would play the lottery. ;)
- So the best way to deal with these feelings is by realizing, “I did the best I could with the knowledge and resources that were available to me at the time.” You might have promised yourself to act in a certain way, but at the moment of your action what you eventually did seemed right at that moment, and that’s the reason you did it. It is not a cheap copout. It is a very deep insight into the nature of the human condition.
- Similarly, you may ask about the person you feel resentment towards, “How could he have done this!?” The only accurate response is “Easily. In his mind, at that moment, it seemed the right thing to do.” And people can only do the things that they believe are right at the moment – they don’t do something just because we think it is right.
- Resentment is like drinking poison with the hope that the other person is going to get sick. Resentment is like holding a hot coal with the intention of throwing it at the person towards whom you feel resentful; in the end, only you get burned.
- **If you caused harm, apologize** honestly and say you didn’t mean it or that you wanted a different outcome (if indeed so). Apologize unconditionally, with non-attachment to outcome – don’t expect immediate (or even delayed) forgiveness or reconciliation. Be ready to apologize several times and to many people. Sometimes many people may continue to live with the consequences of your actions, so be prepared to repair and to realize, that some harm can never be recompensed. Yet, just

because you caused harm, that doesn't mean that you have to remain to this person a *moral hostage*.

- Don't say "I am sorry if someone feels offended" because that is really blaming the victim. Eleanor Roosevelt was correct when saying "Nobody can offend me without my permission," but you don't have to be flippant with ABCDs of emotions.

Forgiving oneself and others

- Healthy forgiveness **is NOT**:
 - excusing what has happened
 - forgetting it
 - denying it
 - condoning it
 - forgoing justice
 - or that the offender is not held accountable.
- Healthy forgiveness **recognizes** that:
 - you don't have to forgive – it is your choice
 - you don't have to forgive even, if the culprit admitted to the offense, apologized, atoned and repaired – it is still your choice
 - you don't have to forgive to coexist
 - what happened was *morally wrong* (if it indeed was)
 - the culprit may need to pay the consequences of the act (legal or otherwise).
- **Forgiveness is**:
 - a commitment not to practice anger by ruminating about what *shouldn't have happened*;
 - a commitment not to seek *revenge* or even contemplate *to get even*
 - a commitment not to dwell on the past event(s)
 - a commitment to let go and not be attached to resentment (or guilt)
 - a commitment not to bring up the forgiven transgression in the future arguments
 - a commitment to instead be practicing thoughts of appreciation and creating joy, compassion, caring and kindness
 - a reconciliation (sometimes joyous) with oneself, others, the culprit, the world, the universe and your spiritual/personal philosophy values.
- **Reconciliation** means:
 - to give those who harmed us the opportunity to repair
 - to gracefully receive forgiveness from others (particularly when you think they had nothing to forgive).