

# INFLUENCING MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

A keynote presentation at the NZOHNA  
& NZISM Conference

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# The Current Situation

- Many organisations now have a very strong focus on identifying and controlling hazards in order to prevent physical harm
- Increasing numbers of employees are now prepared to speak up when they see a person taking actions that could result in physical harm
- Unfortunately, in my experience, it is not the same for mental health, even in the area of stress and fatigue which is specifically included in the OSH legislation



# The Current Situation Cont'd

- If the same focus was placed on mental health individuals would benefit and so would organisations as productivity would be likely to improve



# An Overview

- This presentation focuses on one key aspect of mental health which is the mental messages (self talk) that people give themselves
- We will examine how people's self talk impacts on:
  - What happens to them
  - How they end up feeling
  - Their self esteem



# An Overview Cont'd

- While the primary focus is on how to look after your own mental health, examples will also be given on how to help others look after their mental health
- In a brief session this afternoon I will outline a strategy/technique for encouraging an organisational focus on mental health



# Positive Thinking/Positive Self Talk

- Many of you will have read material and heard speeches on POSITIVE THINKING & POSITIVE SELF TALK
- Many of you will have experienced benefits of positive thinking and positive self talk
- Others will have found that no matter how hard they tried they still failed
- This session will explain why both can occur



# Positive Thinking versus Solution Thinking

- There is a subtle but important difference between positive thinking and SOLUTION THINKING
- It's possible for people to give themselves a message that seems positive but that makes things worse, e.g.

“I am not going to bite my nails”

“I will not snack, especially chocolate”

“I am not going to get stressed over this”

“I must not make a mistake here”



# Positive Thinking versus Solution Thinking Cont'd

- There is a subtle but important difference between positive thinking and SOLUTION THINKING
- It's possible for people to give themselves or others a message that seems positive but that makes things worse
- The reason the 'positive' message fails is that the focus has gone on the *problem*, not the *solution*



# The Process of Turning Thoughts into Actions

Life feels like we go straight from the...

Conscious Thoughts



To the...

**ACTION**

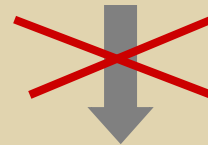
This creates an illusion that we are directly and consciously controlling all our actions



# The Process of Turning Thoughts into Actions

It's an illusion of direct control, as in reality even the most simple task is far too complex to be controlled at a conscious level

Conscious Thoughts



**ACTION**

Remember the example of picking up and using the PowerPoint controller



# The Process of Turning Thoughts into Actions

What actually happens

Even though our subconscious is immensely powerful it works to rules

Conscious Thoughts  
**Toy**



Picture/Image of the  
~~thoughts/behaviour~~  
**Subconscious**  
**Powerhouse**



**ACTION**



# The Process of Turning Thoughts into Actions

Conscious Thoughts

**Toy**



Picture/Image of  
the  
~~thoughts/behaviour~~

**Subconscious**

**Powerhouse**



**ACTION**

Don't drop the ball

I am not going to bite my nails

I will not snack, especially chocolate

I'm not going to get stressed over this

Dropping the ball

Biting nails

Snacking, especially chocolate

Getting stressed

The ball is dropped

Nail biting continues or increases

Snacking, especially chocolate,  
continues or increases

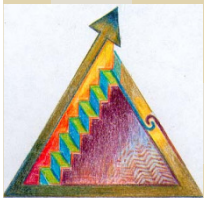
You get stressed



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# Our Subconscious Attempts To Make the Image Occur Regardless Of Whether It Will Be Good or Bad for Us

- Remember the example of the woman skiing into the rocks
- Remember the example of young males hitting power poles
- Remember the example of people feeling exhausted at the end of the year



# Problem versus Solution Messages

## Problem Messages

- Problem messages bring to mind images of what you *do not want to happen*

## Solution Messages

- Solution messages bring to mind images of what you *do want to happen*

*Note – a message might sound positive, but if it brings an image of the problem to mind it will be counterproductive*



# Problem versus Solution Thinking

## Problem Thinking

I'm stressed

I completely overwhelmed

I'm useless

My workload is completely unrealistic

## Solution Thinking

I manage my stress levels effectively

I find ways to cope with the situation I am faced with

I'm not perfect but there is lots about me that is good

I'll raise my workload concerns in a constructive manner with my manager



# Controlling Our Emotions by Controlling Our Thinking

- It's common to hear people make comments such as
  - *“They were rude to me and really upset me.”*
  - *“He cut me off and made me so angry.”*
  - *“She makes me happy.”*
  - *“My workload is stressing me out”*



# Controlling Our Emotions by Controlling Our Thinking (Contd)

- People who make lots of comments like this have low Emotional Intelligence (EQ)
- They might be smart intellectually (high IQ) but they have a low EQ because: -  
**They believe that what happens to them controls their emotional responses**
- They become emotional “puppets on a string” and other people end up controlling their lives



# How Our Self Talk Impacts On Our Feelings

- It is not what happens to us, but our perceptions, beliefs and what we tell ourselves about what happens to us that causes almost all of our emotional distress.

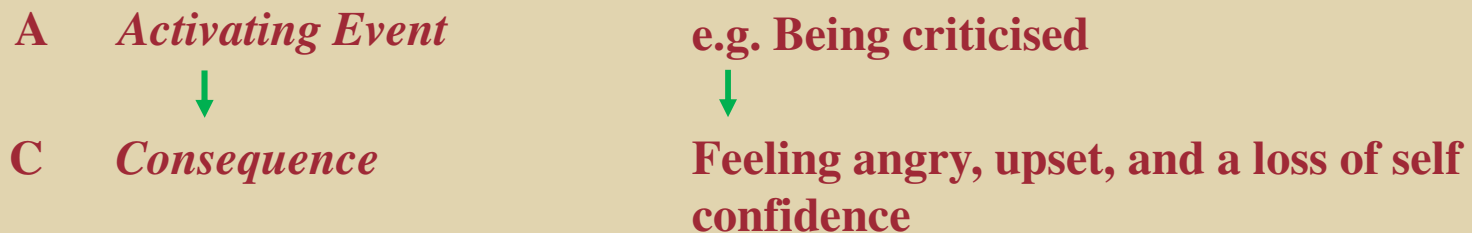
As Shakespeare noted: *“There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”*



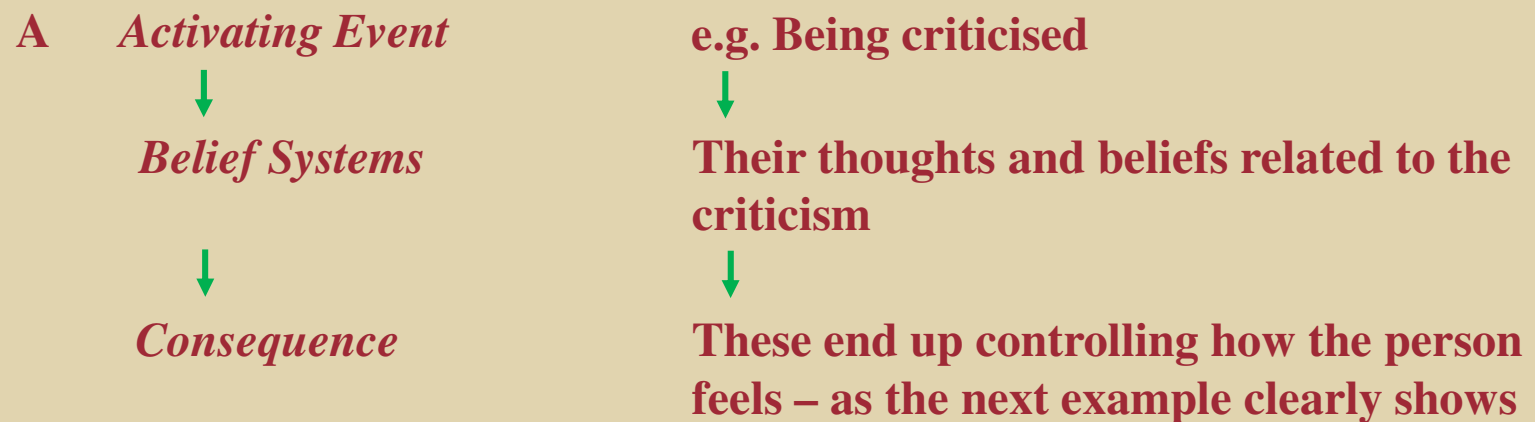
# Thinking Skills for Coping with Criticism

## The A B C Model of Thinking

*What people think often happens:*



*What actually happens*



# Thinking Skills for Coping with Criticism Cont'd

*What actually happens:*

**A**    *Activating  
Event*



**B**    *Belief  
System*



e.g. Being criticised



*Person A:*

Believes that people  
shouldn't be rude to  
them

Thinks that it's  
unfair and they  
shouldn't have to put  
up with it

Believes that being  
criticised makes them  
upset or angry

e.g. Being criticised

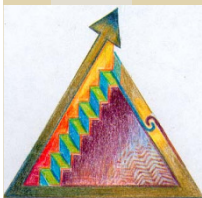


*Person B:*

Accepts that you cannot stop  
some people being rude to you

Accepts the world is unfair

Believes that how you feel is  
mainly up to you – not  
determined by the actions of  
others



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# Thinking Skills for Coping with Criticism Cont'd

<b>B</b>	<i>Belief System</i>	<i>Person A:</i>	<i>Person B:</i>
↓		Concentrates on how bad they are feeling and how they shouldn't have to put up with this	Reminds themselves that being criticised and insulted comes as part of their work and that if they ignore it, it doesn't last for long
		Starts believing some of the criticism	Mentally rejects the criticism
<b>C</b>	<i>Consequence</i>	Feels angry, upset, and a loss of self confidence	Feels relaxed and good about him/herself



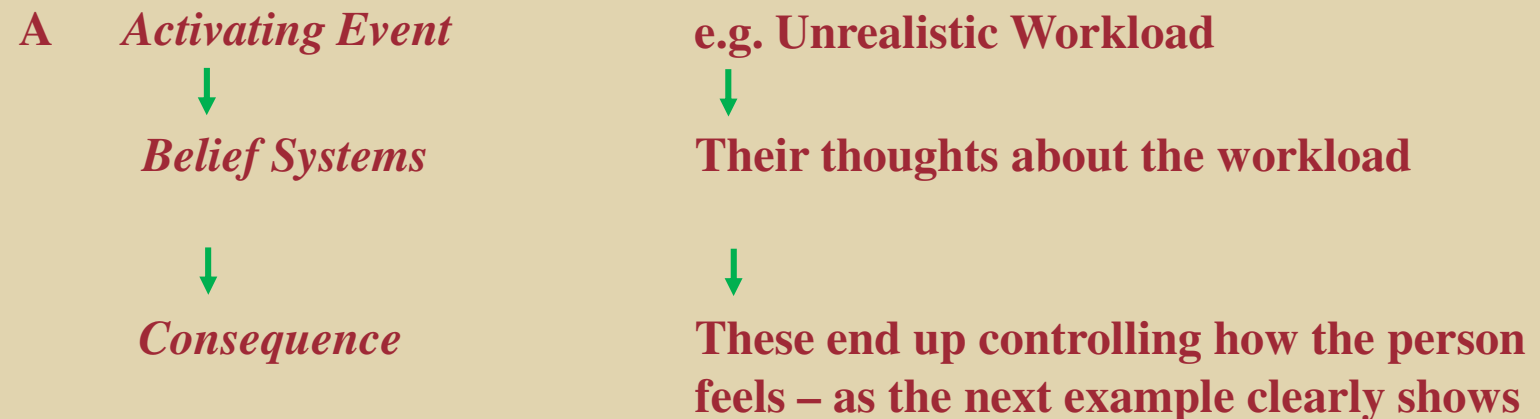
# Thinking Skills for Coping with Stress

## The A B C Model of Thinking

*What people think happens:*

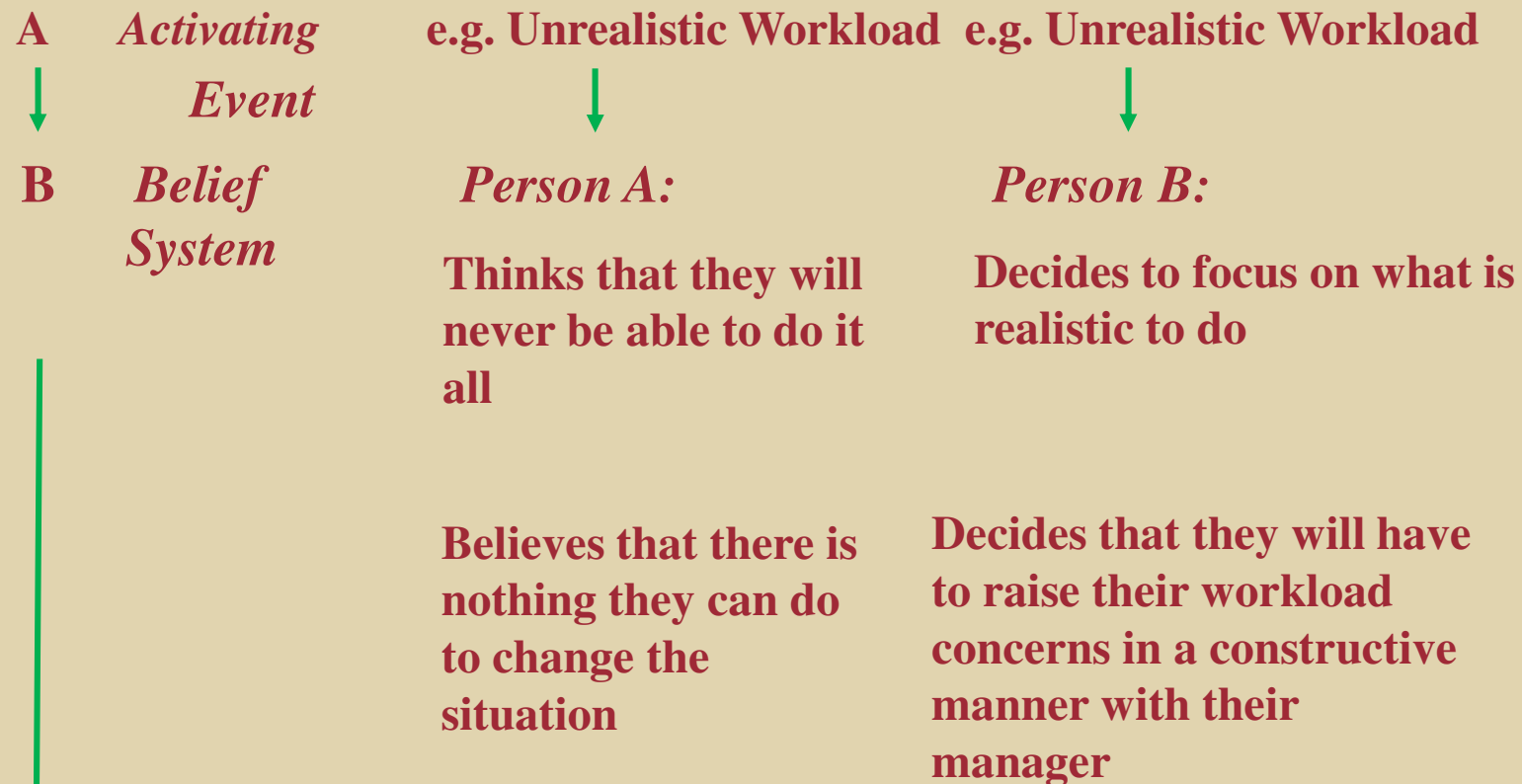


*What actually happens*




# Thinking Skills for Coping with Stress Cont'd

*What actually happens:*



# Thinking Skills for Coping with Stress Cont'd

<b>B</b>	<i>Belief System</i>	<i>Person A:</i>	<i>Person B:</i>
		<b>Believes that their manager will see them as a poor performer</b>	<b>Believes that the best way to avoid been seen a poor performer is to establish their managers priorities and ensure that they focus on these</b>
		<b>Believes that failure will make them look useless</b>	<b>Reminds themselves that s long as they make a concerted effort and have made sure they are focusing on what their manager views a important then, their efforts will be viewed positively</b>
<b>C</b>	<i>Consequence</i>	<b>Feels stressed and overwhelmed</b>	<b>Feels ok about the workload and confident that they can deal with it</b>



# How Self Talk Impacts on Self Esteem

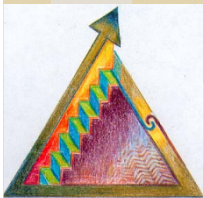
- If people regularly give themselves messages that are “put downs” or criticisms, it will have a negative impact on their self esteem e.g.

*“I’m useless”*

*“I knew I should have never taken this role on”*

*“I feel like an imposter. Other people seem to think I’m competent but it’s only a matter of time until they find out”*

*“I lack confidence and hate situations where the focus is on me”*



# Disciplining Our Thinking

- In our New Zealand culture people are not taught to take responsibility for our thoughts/self talk or to discipline our thoughts/self talk

- Our thoughts/self talk have consequences  
e.g.

Think lots of angry thoughts



Feel angry

Worry lots and have stressful thoughts



Feel Stressed

Think loving peaceful thoughts



Feel loving and peaceful



# Dealing With other People's Negative Self Talk

- If a person said:  
*“This task is going to be really tricky and I could easily get hurt doing it”*; many people would speak up and ask the person to only proceed when they were sure that they could to it safely

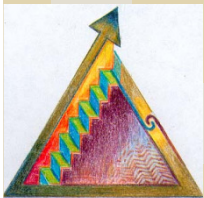


# Dealing With other People's Negative Self Talk Cont'd

- People would be unlikely to reply with comments like:

*“Yeah, I had a task similar to that a few years ago and almost crushed my hand”*

*“If you think that's risky, I did a job a couple of years ago and nearly got killed”*



# Dealing With other People's Negative Self Talk Cont'd

- Unfortunately it's often not the same for mental health issues. If a person said:  
*"I'm feeling overwhelmed"* People are likely to respond by either not making any comment at all or by replying with comments such as:  
*"So am I"*  
*"If you feel overwhelmed then you should see what I've got on at the moment"*



# Applying Principles From Peer Support Programmes

- Formal peer support programmes are used in many overseas emergency services, and I have conducted training in this area in New Zealand
- The key to effective peer support is to teach people to become good listeners and for them to know when and how to refer on



# Applying Principles From Peer Support Programmes Cont'd

- Good listeners also avoid relating the situation/topic the person has raised, back to themselves and/or “upstaging” the comments that were made.
- Good listeners are also very careful giving reassurance, as this can easily “discount” a person’s issues and leave them feeling that they haven’t been heard. (Remember the example of the A who became overwhelmed)



# To Conclude

- **Look after yourself by:**
  - Giving yourself solution messages
  - Controlling how you feel by disciplining your self talk
  - Only saying to yourself what you would say to a close friend
- **Look after your colleagues by:**
  - Listening, probing and encouraging them to reflect on how they can change their situation

