

Negativity begets negativity

By Dr Ed Feraco

Have you ever wondered why some people seemingly deal better with the ups and downs of life? Have you ever wondered about the effects that your self-talk has on your outlook in life or your mood? In Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) there is a concept known as Cognitive Distortions (a.k.a. thinking errors), which is when a person comes to believe something as being true even though it is not. That is, a person might become depressed simply due to the messages they tell themselves such as “I am not good”, “I am a failure”, “nothing ever goes my way” and similar other negative self talk. If we continue to tell ourselves negative things about ourselves we will eventually believe these faulty statements which then begin to define how we feel. In CBT there are ten major cognitive distortions that people use. Half the battle is being able to recognize them. For example, some people employ “all or nothing” thinking. Let’s say a person applies for a prized employment position but is not selected. The person now feels like a total failure and thinks they will never be promoted just from this one negative experience. Another example of cognitive distortion is known as “jumping to conclusions”. For example, a woman goes to a restaurant for a scheduled date and her partner has not shown and is twenty minutes late. The woman automatically tells herself that she is being stood up and that something must be wrong with her despite the fact that her date was actually stuck in a serious traffic jam due to an accident.

The key to improving your outlook and being able to better deal with the ups and downs of life is learning how to recognize the various distortions you use, and then by flipping them into a positive thinking process. You can learn to change how you are feeling simply by making cognitive changes. One technique in Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy Psychology is known as the ABCs: A= Action, B= belief and C= Consequence. People tend to incorrectly assume that the action (A) (another person’s behavior, a person’s words) is the cause of the consequence (C), that is, your feelings. Thus if a person cuts you off in traffic (A) and you become angry (C), you become angry due to your belief system (B), not due to being cut off (A). Hence, our emotions (C) are caused due to our beliefs (B); hence no one can make us feel anything unless we allow ourselves to feel this way. Once people realize that they alone are responsible for how they feel, they quickly similarly understand that they may also learn to dispute their irrational beliefs, thus mastering their emotions. In Buddhism, this is known as being a master of your environment instead of letting the environment be a master of you.