



The ABC Model

Adversity. The bad event or challenge you face.

Belief. Your default thinking or belief about the bad event or challenge. It's your explanation and interpretation of why things have gone wrong.

Consequences. The impact of your beliefs. It's what you feel and what you do as a result of your belief or interpretation of what happened. ■

SOURCE: Seligman (2006).

Our Five Principles of Deliberate Optimism parallel Seligman's ABC Model in that both ask participants to describe accurately the source of our angst, to examine more than one assumed motive for the cause, and to consider the long-term effect of our selected actions.

As an example, let's say your principal just informed you that next year instead of teaching the sixth-grade physical science classes you have taught for the past 7 years, she is reassigning you to teach eighth-grade earth science classes. You are appalled. You have spent years gathering resources and honing the lessons you use in teaching physical science. You assume you are being punished for some transgression, and you cannot believe you will no longer be teaching your favorite age group and preferred content. You just know that you will be stuck teaching eighth grade from now on, and you don't even like earth science. You are inconsolable about this change in your career; everyone knows how much you love teaching sixth grade, so this must be some kind of personal vendetta. Let's apply the ABC Model to this scenario.

Adversity. You are being switched from teaching sixth-grade physical science to eighth-grade earth science.

Belief. You believe this decision was made to punish you in some way and that you will be stuck with teaching your least favorite science for the rest of your time at that school. Teaching earth science will never be as much fun as teaching physical science.

Consequences. You are hurt, angry, and fearful. You would like to get even with whomever made this decision. You know you are going to hate teaching earth science and you are not too crazy about teaching eighth graders. You decide you will let everyone know how unhappy you are and will stop doing all the many extras you do to help out around the school.

It is easy to get caught up in our protected *teaching terrains*. Teachers are some of the most territorial mammals on this planet. How many of us write our names on every piece of furniture, equipment, material, and piece of flotsam in our proximity? Many of us like to take ownership of a particular subject area, seat in the lounge, or even our favorite place to park. Defaulting to the *They* versus *Us* mentality is sometimes an automatic reaction when we perceive that someone is trying to take something that is ours. But does it help us long term to feel victimized and offended?

Personalizing adversity only makes it worse as does viewing obstacles as *permanent* and *pervasive*. Perhaps we need to do a better job of trying to argue ourselves out of these perceptions.

THE ABCD MODEL

DISPUTATION

Seligman refers to arguing with our thoughts as *disputation*. It's a key practice for building optimism. It works by countering our negative thoughts with deliberation and reflection. To dispute our negative thoughts, we can practice with his ABCD method.

First we must identify the adversity, our beliefs, and the likely consequences of those beliefs. Next, we must dispute our beliefs and be aware of how different perceptions change the consequences. For example, if we originally explained our adversity with beliefs that are **permanent, personal, and pervasive**, we feel paralyzed and defeated. Alternately, if we explain our beliefs as **temporary, external, and specific**, we create hope, which leads to action.

FOUR WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR DISPUTATION

According to Seligman, there are four ways you can dispute your beliefs more effectively:

Evidence. Ask yourself, “What’s the evidence you have for and against the belief?” (*My principal isn’t known for making arbitrary decisions. I know that she respects me as a teacher. There have been concerns about the lack of active learning in eighth grade. Perhaps I am being moved there to be a model for the other eighth-grade teachers.*)

Alternatives. Ask yourself, “Is there another way to look at the adversity?” (*If I am totally honest with myself, I’ve grown a little complacent about my sixth-grade class. I could almost teach physical science in my sleep. Moving to a new area is probably going to help me stay challenged, and I have always performed better when I’m challenged.*)

Implications. Ask yourself, “What’s the impact?” Assuming that your negative explanation is right, check whether you are making mountains out of molehills. (*I’m probably not going to like teaching eighth grade as much as I do sixth grade, but I guess at least I will still be teaching middle school science. My first love is middle school, and my second love is science, so this really isn’t the end of the world.*)

Usefulness. Ask yourself, “Is this a good time for me to be thinking about this problem?” If now is not the time, then either do something physically distracting, schedule another time to with yourself to think things over, or write the negative thoughts down and deal with them when you’re ready. (*“This assignment change could not have come at a worse time. I have got to have knee surgery in a couple of weeks, I’m trying to study for finals in my graduate courses, and I’ve got to put my car in the shop this Friday. This is not the best time for me to be thinking about all the changes I will have to make next year. I think I’ll put those thoughts on hold for a few weeks until the rest of my life settles down a bit.”*) Being able to compartmentalize our worries and address them at appropriate times is a good first step toward handling difficulty with optimism.

Disputing your negative thoughts might help you change your perception and the consequences of your altered perception as follows:

Adversity. You are being switched from teaching sixth-grade physical science to eighth-grade earth science.

Belief. You have no idea why you are being switched, but you feel confident it has nothing to do with you personally. You have really enjoyed teaching sixth-grade physical science, but you are a good teacher, and you believe you can learn to do an effective job teaching earth science, too. You have no idea how long this assignment will last, so if you don’t like teaching eighth-grade science, you will take steps to get moved back to teaching sixth-grade science.

Consequences. You are curious about why this decision was made and are anxious to speak with your administrator about why you are being moved. You know that you are a team player and will try to accommodate whatever works best for all concerned. You hope you’ll learn to like teaching eighth-grade earth science as much as you do sixth-grade physical science. You are already thinking of some resources you can tap to help you get started.

THE ABCDE MODEL

Seligman concludes his model with an *E* for *energization*. He notes that when we dispute our negative thinking and replace it with reasoning that is reflective and grounded in beliefs about our best selves, we change defeat and depression into hope and energy. He calls this step *energization*. He writes about a familiar teaching situation:

Adversity. I haven't been able to break through the apathy that some of my students feel toward learning.

Belief. Why can't I reach these kids? If I were more dynamic or more creative or more intelligent, I would be able to excite them about learning. If I can't reach the kids who need the most help, then I am not doing my job. I must not be cut out for teaching.

Consequence. I don't feel like being creative. I have little energy and I feel depressed and dejected.

Disputation. It doesn't make sense to base my worth as a teacher on a small percentage of my students. The truth is, I do excite the majority of my students, and I spend a great deal of time planning lessons that are creative and allow the students as much individualization as possible. At the end of the term, when I have a little more time, I can organize a meeting with other teachers in the school who face this same problem. Maybe as a group we will be able to come up with some ideas that will help us reach the apathetic students.

Energization. I feel better about the work I do as a teacher and hopeful that new ideas can be generated through a discussion with other teachers. (Seligman, 2006, p. 270)

You may be thinking, "Well, it's easy to list all those steps, but can we really control our thoughts that way?" We believe we can all control our thoughts. It's not always an easy or even a simple process, but with practice, it can become a habit. We can start reclaiming our joy in teaching by becoming aware of the power we already have.

SELF-DETERMINATION

As experienced teachers, we have to admit that each of us has spent some time in the *ain't it awful* place. You know the situation; a bunch of educators gather to collectively bemoan the obstacles that keep us from doing a great job as teachers. It generally starts with someone shaking his or her head and saying things like, "Well, the principal just informed me that I have to cover all of my bulletin boards during standardized test week. There's not one thing on those boards that will influence a student's answers, but he says just it's a rule that every teacher will cover all informational material on bulletin boards and classroom walls. That is such a waste of time! There is no reason to burden us with such a stupid mandate." The surrounding group members shake their heads in misery as they do the familiar *ain't it awful* routine. No one offers a possible explanation, a plan, or a solution to the challenge. Participants simply hang their heads and say, "Look what *They* are doing to *Us* now. *Ain't it awful?*"