
MAY. 2020

Don't let your thoughts take the 'P': Regaining perspective in challenging times

A psychological resource compiled by Dr Sara Evans



THE WHO:

My name is Sara Evans and although for the past couple of years I've worked in a development role in a small business, I'm a clinical psychologist by training and registered to practise by The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).

The Why & The What

We've heard it said often enough that these are strange times and although this phrase may have become something of a cliché, it doesn't make it any less true.

Now, I'm anything but a Pollyanna personality who puts a positive spin on everything whatever the circumstances. In fact, I personally go in for what you might call "healthy pessimism". However, at times when the path ahead is bumpy and difficult to navigate, we could all use a handrail to steady ourselves and pick out the way forward.

And that's what I'd like to share with you: some thinking tools that can act as a mental handrail to bring some balance to our thoughts, help moderate some of the intense emotions that many of us are feeling right now and hopefully win back some capacity for constructive thought and action.

How our thoughts can take the 'P'

We all strive to make sense of the world and we all have an “explanatory style” that determines how we do this. An explanatory style is simply a tendency to think about and explain the things that happen to us in certain ways.

Our personal explanatory styles can be thought of as positions on three dimensions or poles. We're going to think about these three dimensions, which define the ways that we explain the world, as the three 'Ps'.

Permanence: “Things will always be this way; there's no way things can get better”

How permanent or stable do you think a situation is across time? Are you able to perceive that things can change and won't be this way forever? Or is it hard for you to even contemplate the idea that things could be different in future?



Pervasiveness: “Everything is awful; there's nothing that isn't going wrong”

How global or all-encompassing do you perceive an issue to be? Can you consider that what is happening only applies to some situations and affects only some areas of your life? Or do you generalise so that it seems like everything in all areas of your life is affected?

"We all have an 'explanatory style' that determines how we make sense of the world"

Personalisation: “This is bad because of who I am; I should be able to control things”

Do you think that what is happening is best explained in terms of internal or external factors? Do you attribute what is happening to outside forces and other people and recognise the limits of what you can control?

Or have you concluded that the difficulties you are experiencing say something fundamental about you as a person; that they are mostly due to factors inside you and that you should be able to control them? The tendency to over-personalise or self-blame is perhaps the most pernicious ‘P-trap’ of all.

When we’ve developed an explanatory style based on thoughts that “take the ‘P’” and we tend to make sense of things as permanent (stable), pervasive (global) and personal (internal) then we experience greater stress in response to a given situation. We feel at fault or lacking as a person somehow, defeated, discouraged and even hopeless. We also experience stressors as more of a threat.

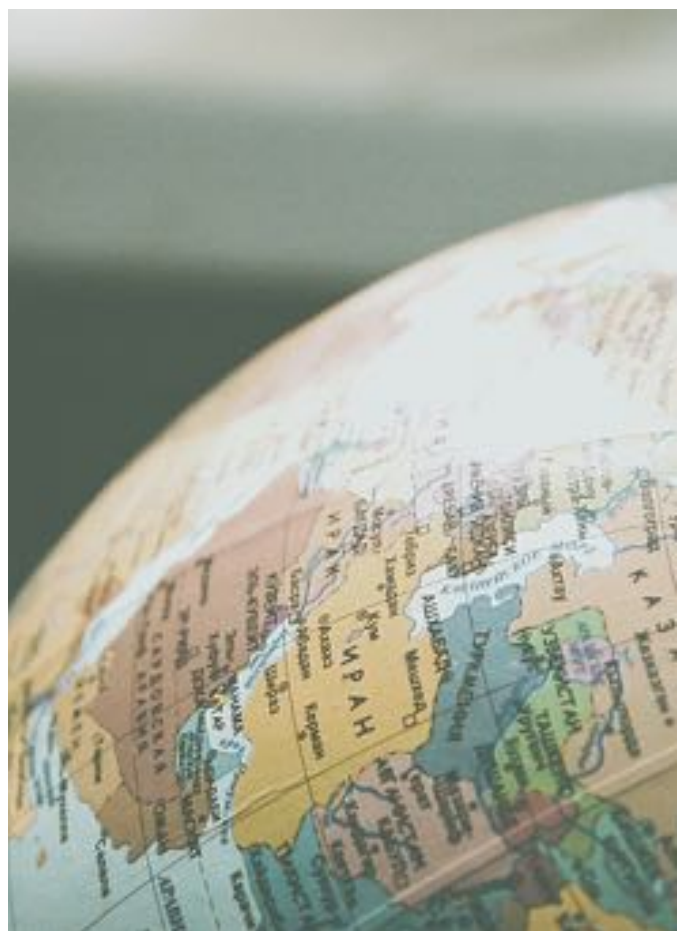
Although we may still be facing very real difficulties, when we are able to acknowledge that things are open to change (unstable), are more specific or limited to only some spheres of our lives (local) and we accept the role of situational or external factors, it can reduce the stress and sense of threat that we feel.

So I can think my way out of, say, a global pandemic?

Absolutely not. The take-home message is not that we should all just “think positive” or we can conquer anything through sheer force of personality alone.

Sometimes the sort of ideas we’re talking about here are misused to reduce social problems to the individual level, therefore implying that if we don’t think ourselves out of trouble, then we’ve chosen to wallow in our own misery.

“The take-home is not that we should all just ‘think positive’”



That kind of misinterpretation couldn't be further from the truth. We're going through a worldwide event unprecedented in our lifetimes. Whatever you are feeling can't be wrong and is not to be denied or suppressed.

We can't think away external reality or join in the pretence that things are the product of your thoughts to render them controllable. It's also not about never taking responsibility for things and failing to exert control where we can. Not at all. Facing up to the reality of a situation in order to process and respond to it is a healthy psychological reaction.

Talking about how our thoughts can take the 'P' and how we can fall into less helpful patterns of thinking is not about denying reality but it is about the possibility of finding some rational balance amid the confusion and uncertainty. And this, in turn, can have a positive impact on our emotional state and our functioning.

So, at the present time, we could be swept up by thoughts that the world will never be right again, that every part of our lives has changed for the worse and that we are struggling to cope because we aren't as strong and resilient as we should be. Or we can not let our thoughts "take the 'P'" and acknowledge the enormity of the situation but hold onto the sense that it won't be like this forever, some things are actually OK and that we are understandably affected by world events much like everybody else.



Moving from 'Ps' to 'Qs'

I like to think about applying these insights in terms of interrogating our thoughts. That is, not to assume that our thinking is completely negative or wrong in some way but to accept and recognise that our thoughts are not reality.

And, when we create this separation between thoughts and reality, we can ask questions about our thoughts to check out whether we might be missing some alternative and more balanced ways of explaining the world. And perhaps these alternative ways of seeing can offer a degree of emotional relief and provide an opportunity to focus our efforts more constructively.

Interrogating permanence:

On a philosophical level, nothing is permanent. Even as you're reading this sentence, many brief moments have passed. Sometimes, when we feel we can't cope, it can help to bring ourselves back to the level of individual moments and recognise that we are tolerating whatever distress we are experiencing and surviving.

Coping in the longer-term is continuing to deal with each moment as it comes and noticing what does change from moment to moment and over time.

Interrogating pervasiveness:

Recognising that not absolutely everything in our lives has been affected or derailed requires us to be open to seeing the exceptions. This is no mean feat when our thinking patterns have carved out a pervasive groove over time.

Thinking about the concept of prejudice can be helpful here. If someone has a prejudice, let's say racism against a particular group, and comes across a positive news story about people from that group, how might they respond?

They might ignore the story altogether or dismiss it as inaccurate or deliberate propaganda.

They might even conclude that the story just proves their point of view because it's only newsworthy as most members of the group are terrible people!

Our own thoughts can perform similar psychological gymnastics that stop us seeing past the generalisations we've made.

Being aware of the "prejudices" in our own thinking gives us the opportunity to look past them to recognise exceptions.

In fact, being aware of and challenging the "prejudices" in our thinking can help us interrogate all of the 'Ps'.



Interrogating personalisation in relation to self-blame:

The “responsibility pie” is a useful technique for checking out whether you are on taking on too much of the blame and responsibility for a situation. First, brainstorm all of the other factors that may have contributed to a situation or event. Next, attribute a % figure representing the amount of responsibility for the situation to each factor. After assigning responsibility to each of these factors, give a % figure to your share of the responsibility (you may have to adjust your initial figures to ensure a total of 100%). You can then map out the responsibility share of each factor as a pie chart.

This strategy forces you to consider alternative possibilities to the initial assumption that you are to blame and to confront the degree to which you may be taking on too much personal responsibility.

Interrogating personalisation in relation to unhelpful comparisons:

Personalisation can also take the form of destructive comparisons to others with thoughts like “other people are coping and being productive, so I must be weak to feel like this”. One strategy for addressing this kind of thought is to remember that comparing your internal knowledge of yourself to what you think you know about other people is not a fair comparison.



Comparing your “insides” to other people’s “outsides” is like comparing apples and...elephants. A beautifully wrapped box might lead us to make assumptions about its contents but we’ve actually got no idea what’s really inside.

Putting it into Practice

The next time you notice yourself feeling overwhelmed, threatened or ground down by things that are going on around you, try taking a mental step back and wonder to yourself if your thoughts might be “taking the ‘P’”. Just noticing these tendencies in our thinking and bringing them to our awareness can create a shift and make a difference.

To take things a step further, you might even be able to catch some specific ‘P’ thoughts that are linked to how you’re feeling and use some of the ideas discussed here to interrogate them.

Thank You

Thank you for reading this resource and I hope that some of the ideas resonated with you and that you go on to find them helpful.

All the very best,

Sara

mail.sara@gmail.com

[LinkedIn](#)

If you’re interested in these kinds of psychological ideas and insights...

I’m in the early stages of developing some further material into a mini-course format with the working title “Re-cycle your thinking: Using the thoughts, feelings, behaviour cycle to increase insight and make changes”.

I’d love to get a sense of whether people would be interested in this in future. If you’d like me to let you know when I’ve developed the course, then please sign up for an email notification [here](#).

You can also use [this link](#) to leave feedback about this resource and to let me know which other topics you’d like to hear about from a psychological perspective?

