

# Reach Your Potential---A Newsletter for Self-Growth and Performance Enhancement

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## “Challenge the Thought, Change the Response”

--Dana Johnston, L.C.S.W., CPT

“I don’t know why; it just happened.” Sound familiar? Sometimes we are not sure why we behave a certain way and blame it on impulse. Although there are some situations when a behavior truly is impulsive, often times, our behavior is driven by a chain that we may not be aware of. The chain looks like this:

### Automatic

**Situation>>Thought>> Emotion>> Behavior>> Outcome**

A **situation** is anything happening to you, directly or indirectly. (Reading this article is a situation.) **Automatic thoughts** are the initial thoughts you have about the situation. **Emotions** are the feelings stemming from the thoughts. This is not “I feel good/bad”, but rather a specific emotion such as happy, sad, scared, excited, embarrassed, disrespected, lonely, disappointed, apathetic, angry, etc. The **behavior** is what you do in response to the emotion. The behavior can be a nonverbal gesture such as a smile, a gross motor action such as correcting your posture while lifting weights, or a verbal response such as screaming. The **outcome** is what occurs as a result of your behavior.

Let’s follow an example for clarification: The situation is that Sally (not an actual client) was cut off by another car while driving. Her automatic thought was “That jerk. He just can’t drive that way.” Her emotions might be scared, angry, and disrespected. Her behavior is that she sped up and rode the other driver’s bumper. The outcome was that she rear-ended him.

So what does this have to do with performance enhancement? Everything! Whether you are working to improve your next ride, stride, game, or overall mood, what you think about a given situation leads to how you behave. That behavior/action affects not only your performance in a sport, but our actions affect our relationships with others. If the thought about a given situation is positive, then the following emotions are likely positive, which then lead to a positive behavioral response and outcome. The opposite is also true; a negative automatic thought leads to a negative outcome.

Go back to Sally. If her automatic thought was switched to “Wow that person is driving dangerously. I wonder if he has an emergency?” then she might have avoided getting angry and retaliating.

If you find yourself often depressed, angry, anxious, or from a performance perspective, choking up with pressure, try analyzing your thoughts to see if the above chain is following a negative route. The goal is not to live in a plastic world where we think happy thoughts all the time,



but rather to challenge the negative thoughts in order to break the cycle. When confronted with mental or physical fatigue in competition, our “instinct” is to think, “I can’t do this.” If we stay on that thought, our performance is done. When we challenge the negative thoughts, we might find a little extra from within to finish strong.

Here is a plan to begin overcoming the negative chain:

- 1) Begin by keeping a daily log. At the end of the day, write out the chain in response to a situation. It does not have to be a negative chain as the idea is to begin reflecting on the connection between your thoughts and subsequent emotions and behaviors.
- 2) Begin by challenging the negative thoughts on paper. When you observe the negative sequence in your writing, ask yourself, what would be a different way to think about this situation? What would be a different perspective? Then identify the emotions attached to the new thoughts and speculate on the possible behavioral response and outcome.
- 3) Once you are able to flow through this exercise with ease, try to catch yourself in action. When you experience a “negative” emotion, ask yourself, what am I thinking right now? How am I interpreting this situation? Then begin to challenge those negative thoughts. The goal is to diffuse the negative emotion so that your behavior and outcome do not suffer. Some people visualize a stop sign in their mind or audibly say “stop” whenever they catch themselves in a negative chain in order to cease it from progressing to a negative behavior. With time, you may find that your mood improves, negative behaviors decrease, performance improves, and your relationships with others are a bit smoother.

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