

# Cognitive skills improve resiliency

by Michael T. Grill

In the spring issue of *NAEMT News*, we identified two bridge behaviors – sleep and relaxation – as critical components for improving EMS practitioner resiliency. In this final installment on resiliency traits, we will discuss two cognitive methods used by resilient people – changing beliefs and maintaining perspective. Of the 13 tools of resiliency, none are more important than how we think or the way we perceive our world.

## Changing thoughts

*You become what you believe. - Earl Nightingale*

Resilient people understand that thoughts create feelings – and feelings determine behavior – or how we act. Therefore, if you are not happy with how you feel or the results in your life, you might examine and subsequently modify the thoughts – or beliefs – from which the results or feelings

evolved. As the saying goes: “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always gotten.”

Without realizing it, EMS practitioners can begin developing self-defeating patterns of thinking that create negative consequences in their lives – self-fulfilling prophecies. Examples include:

- **All or nothing thinking.** When we don’t do things perfectly, we may view ourselves as complete failures. A paramedic, for example, properly sizes up a motor vehicle accident, calls for proper resources, and performs the correct procedures on a trauma patient – yet views himself as a failure because he missed his first attempt at establishing an IV.
- **Overgeneralization.** This type of thinking views a single negative outcome as an ongoing pattern of defeat. In the example above, the paramedic would think “I ALWAYS miss my first IV attempt.” Clues that suggest overgeneralization include the use of words such as ALWAYS, NEVER, EVERY TIME and similar absolutes.
- **“Should” statements.** These negative thoughts include the words should, shouldn’t, have to, ought to or must.

Subsequently, the EMS practitioner is wracked by guilt and shame, with anger directed inward. Using the first example, the paramedic would think “I shouldn’t have missed that first IV attempt,” and is unable to sleep because of an obsession with the experience.

- **Discounting the positive.** We use this negative thought pattern when we reject or minimize positive experiences. An EMS practitioner is able to initiate a difficult IV on a patient after two previous attempts by other practitioners. When complimented, the practitioner states, “Finally! If only I could do that on all my patients!” While self-improvement should be a goal of all EMS practitioners, minimizing our positive experiences fails to allow us to enjoy our successes when they do occur. A side effect is that people will stop complimenting us because we discount their praise.

It is important to remember that our thoughts determine our actions. Once an EMS practitioner recognizes a self-defeating thought pattern, it is important to short-circuit the negative belief.

One resiliency tool – the ABC (Activating event, Belief, and Consequences) worksheet – allows us to understand patterns in our thinking that may be the cause of many of our problems.

First, quantify the feeling or emotion that you’re experiencing. Then follow the ABC process:

**ACTIVATING EVENT** What situation ACTIVATED the thoughts I’m having? “I missed the IV attempt on my patient and my partner had to intervene and start the IV.”

**BELIEFS** What are my BELIEFS regarding this? “I should’ve been able to start the IV on the first attempt. I ALWAYS blow my first IV attempt.”

**CONSEQUENCES** What are the CONSEQUENCES of my beliefs? “I feel guilty. I thought I was a better medic than I actually am.”

Once the ABC’s are identified, it becomes possible to identify negative and unrealistic beliefs and subsequently explore thoughts that are empowering and more realistic.

- Identify any self-defeating thought patterns you may be subconsciously using. “It feels like I’m using ‘should statements’ and am probably ‘over-generalizing’ this situation.”
- Is there a more realistic view of thinking about this event? “Everybody misses an IV once in a while. In fact, I remember my partner missed an IV last month while I was able to start



it on the same patient. I guess nobody is always perfect on their first attempt.

■ How does this more realistic thought change how you feel? Again, quantify the new feelings and compare current feelings to the emotions you felt prior to engaging in the ABC exercise.

### Changing perspective

*I've had many catastrophes in my life - some of which actually happened. - Mark Twain*

Belief's kissing cousin is perspective – defined as, *how you think or perceive a person or event*. Resilient people are realistic. They know how important it is to face life realistically



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with a commitment to do their best. Resilient people neither minimize nor catastrophize events; instead they seek balance by keeping a clear head, refusing to allow self-defeating thoughts to creep into their lives.

A useful tool for changing our thinking is to perform a worst case/best case probability analysis. This

gives us an opportunity to closely examine our perspective in a given situation.

1. Describe a situation stressful to you: *I just learned I have an unscheduled meeting first thing tomorrow morning with my supervisor and our medical director.*
2. What are your worst-case fears? *I did something wrong and am going to be disciplined. Will I lose my job?*
3. Predict the likelihood that your worst-case scenarios will occur. *A sudden, unscheduled meeting ALWAYS occurs when my peers have been disciplined. Have I done anything wrong lately? I was late for my shift last week – but it was only by a few minutes. It was the first time in the two years I have worked here and there are a lot of people who have been late – and they've never been disciplined. I don't believe I am in trouble.*
4. Identify a best-case alternative. *I submitted a proposal to my supervisor and medical director last month on how to improve our response times.*
5. Predict the likelihood that your best-case alternative will occur. *I've been a good employee, involved with the community, and always willing to work overtime when needed. Since all*

*employees were asked for ideas on how to improve response times, I'm sure this is the reason for tomorrow's meeting.*

6. Describe the scenario you would most like to occur. *The meeting tomorrow is to discuss my proposal on improving response times.*
7. Identify what you will need to do to make the desired scenario occur. *I will prepare a proposal document for both my supervisor and medical director. I will include the following elements: a description of the problem, my solution, data supportive of why my solution will work, a cost-analysis of implementing my solution, and a specific description of how I will help implement my proposal.*

We are what we think. Your mindset affects your perception. By changing how you think and the way you perceive people and situations, you change your world – literally. You don't let yourself 'want' what you don't believe you can cause. It's foolish to change your feelings when your feelings are based on how you think.

Resilient people see opportunity for personal transformation in every situation. They refuse to allow the past to dictate who they are. Instead, they allow the past to decide who they wish to become.

Resilient people understand that life is stress. In fact, it's often one stressor after another. Finding life meaningful involves finding stress and the accompanying challenge of solving problems meaningful – or at least seeing the personal opportunities that come along with them.

EMS practitioners are especially blessed in this regard because nothing gives life more depth than to be in the presence of possible death and dying – and being able to sometimes prevent it from occurring.

Our personal interpretation of these stressful events and the manner in which we deal with them ultimately determines our mental and physical health. Our profession is inherently stressful. When you put into practice some of these protective behaviors to sustain a healthy lifestyle, you strengthen your resiliency – and the patient you revive is you.

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**This is the last in the series of four articles to help you in your life and on the job. Look for a handy summary table of resiliency skills in the next issue.**