

## **Best Practice: Tools and Tips for Divorced Parents and Divorce Professionals**

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### **Challenging beliefs, identifying options**

Cognitive psychology demonstrates that our beliefs about events, rather than the events themselves, trigger specific feelings and responses. Spending a day with the ex-spouse at the children's soccer tournament may activate excitement for one parent ("The kids will love seeing us cheering them on"), dread for another ("Great, another chance to argue") or indifference for a third ("Been there, done that").

Cognitive psychology has focused particular attention on how beliefs shape our responses to adversity. Depending upon how we perceive and interpret such events, we feel different emotions, such as hopeful ("I know how to fix this"), guilty ("It's all my fault"), or anger ("This shouldn't have happened to me"). A person's beliefs, therefore, play a major part in how well she or he copes.

Martin Seligman, a renowned psychologist, invented an easy way to remember this sequence:

**Adversity** (a challenging event or circumstance)

**Belief** (how the event is perceived and interpreted)

**Consequence** (the feelings and behaviors that flow from the beliefs)

This simple A-B-C tool can be immensely helpful to divorced parents who want to understand why they become so undone by the other parent's behavior. It's an easy tool to use: Identify the triggering event, note the consequent feelings, and then carefully analyze the beliefs that shaped a particular response.

Our beliefs generally follow one of two paths. If we tend to look back, our beliefs likely focus on: "*Why did this happen?*" If we tend to look forward, we wonder: "*What will happen next?*" It's easy to see, then, how different feelings flow from different ways of viewing the problem. If my answer to the first question is: "*My ex is entirely to blame for this mess,*" I'm likely to feel angry and resentful. But if my answer is: "*Wow, I really screwed up here,*" I am more likely to feel regret and guilt. Similarly, if my answer to the second question is: "*Things can only get worse,*" I will probably feel anxious and helpless. But if my thought is: "*I've learned something important to use going forward,*" I'm more likely to feel optimistic and hopeful.

Cognitive psychologists emphasize, however, that identifying our beliefs is just the first step. Knowing that I blame myself for the current mess with my ex doesn't change how I feel or change the situation. It's still a mess. The next step is to challenge my beliefs, particularly if I exclusively blame either myself or my ex, view the problem as so entrenched that it will never change, or have a pessimistic outlook. Such thinking patterns are often driven by heated emotions and bias rather than a cool, objective appraisal of the problem. If I'm always looking back and becoming angry, for example, it may help to simply tell myself to look forward: "*I can't change the past, so forget it. Let's figure out what I can do going forward.*" And by accepting a new way of seeing the problem, I can consider new ways of responding.

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