

# CHALLENGING UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS



When you were in the military, you often had to be vigilant and on “high alert” due to unpredictable and uncontrollable events. Because the way you interpret things determines how you react to them, you can change the way you think about a situation, and this will cause you to react differently to it. If your interpretations can be more positive and constructive, you’ll find they benefit you more in the way you react.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

### STEP 1 Identify inaccurate or unhelpful thoughts



The first step is to pay attention to your thoughts, so you become aware of how you tend to interpret the world around you. These thoughts are the things we say to ourselves and the things that go through our minds as we face various life challenges.

### STEP 2 Understand that thoughts cause different behaviors and emotions

How we feel and act during a situation depends on how we interpret things. Interpretations are influenced by our past experiences, our attitudes, and our personalities. Reactions to events that are not life-threatening never really pop up out of the blue; they are always influenced by our thoughts and the way we interpret situations.

**EXAMPLE — Different interpretations of being stuck in traffic can cause different reactions:**

#### NEGATIVE INTERPRETATION

- This will take forever! I’ll never get home.
- Why does this always happen to me?

#### POSITIVE INTERPRETATION

- I guess I’ll be late. Hopefully not too much.
- Well, since I’m stuck here anyway, I might as well listen to my music.

### STEP 3 Challenging unhelpful thoughts

Ask yourself if there is evidence that your thought is actually accurate or true. Often you’ll find there is not a lot of evidence to support unhelpful thoughts. If you find this is true, why not try a different way of thinking about the situation — a way that can be helpful and useful?

Here are some other useful questions to ask yourself when challenging your thoughts:



- ★ Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms or ignoring the positive?
- ★ Am I using “exaggerating” words, such as never, always, forever, need, should, must, can’t, and every time?
- ★ Am I basing my judgments on feelings rather than facts?

### STEP 4 Replacing unhelpful thoughts with helpful ones



Once you’ve challenged an inaccurate or unhelpful thought, the last step is to replace it with a more realistic, positive, and constructive thought. The new thought should be believable and balanced rather than too “rosy” or naïve.



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