

How Your Thinking Creates Your Reality

What cognitive science has to say about how we experience life.

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There are a lot of people who are offended by the idea that “we create our reality.” They see it as a version of blaming the victim. Nobody asks for bad things to happen to them. I couldn’t agree more. But as someone who has been helping people change their thinking and behavior using cognitive [therapy](#) for over 15 years, I can also say that I couldn’t agree more with the idea that we do indeed create much of our reality. Denying this denies your power.

What I explain to my patients is that there are three buckets in life—things we control, things we influence, and things over which we have no control.

What is not under our control are the many random events of life. The families we were born into, earthquakes, pandemics, illness, job layoffs, the death of loved ones, fires, and car accidents, to name a few. These are circumstances that we experience and events that we are aware of.

We influence other living things with our actions. If you walk into a room, see a stranger sitting there, and decide to slap them in the face, that person will surely respond differently than if you had instead smiled. But you don’t determine how that person responds. That person could decide to run away, turn the other cheek, or slap you back.

What we control, and where we really start to create our reality, is in how we perceive/interpret/think about the events in our life that generate our feelings about those events, and how we subsequently respond with our behavior. No one can choose your thoughts or actions; those are yours alone.

If your significant other breaks up with you and your thought is—*I will never find anyone else to love me again*—then you will likely experience some very negative emotions like [depression](#), and you are likely to engage in behaviors consistent with these feelings such as staying in bed. If, on the other hand, your thought is—*I am glad this loser is out of my life*—then you are likely to feel and act quite differently. You choose which thought to think.

Now, here is where the creating part gets really serious. Your thoughts, if you think them over and over, and assign truth to them, become beliefs. Beliefs create a cognitive lens through which you interpret the events of your world and this lens serves as a selective filter through which you sift [the environment](#) for evidence that matches up with what you believe to be true.

For example, if the belief you form when your partner breaks up with you is—*I’m not attractive enough*—and then you go to a party where 10 people tell you that you look great and one person says your outfit is—*interesting*—you are likely to go home and fixate on the ‘interesting’ comment. You might think other thoughts consistent with your belief such as—*why do I always pick the wrong thing to wear, I have no style, other people dress so much better than me, I must look like such a loser, no wonder my ex dumped me*. The other 10 people who said you look great might as well

have not existed. You only took in the evidence from the environment that was consistent with your belief, which then reinforced your original belief that you are not attractive enough.

Because the brain's selective filtering system, often referred to as [priming](#), works on an activation/inhibition model, when the brain is primed by a certain belief to look for something, it shuts down competing [neural](#) networks, so you actually have a hard time seeing evidence to the contrary of an already existing belief. That's why people who are depressed see a more depressing world. It's also why you are so convinced that your view of the world is the "truth." What most people don't realize is they are participating in creating their own version of the truth.

What you take in from the environment through your belief filter becomes your [self-concept](#). Your self-concept is made up of *I am* beliefs about who you are presently, and *I can* beliefs about who you are capable of being in the future. From these *I am* and *I can* statements you create stories and narratives about who you are, that you tell yourself and other people all day long. *I am not good enough, I am not lovable, I can not do it, I am smart, I am capable, I can achieve my [goals](#).* You are the main character in your story and you write the script based on your self-concept that is largely self-created.

You write the story of what you think is likely and/or possible based on what you believe is true and then you take actions consistent with those expectations. When you act on what you expect will happen before it actually happens, you participate in creating the experience. For example, if you don't have a positive self-concept and you [fear](#) rejection when you go on a date or go to a job interview, you are not likely to present your best self by acting calm and self-confident; you are likely to be [anxious](#) and act in a way that is more likely to result in rejection. Hence, the *self-fulfilling prophecy*. We act in ways likely to bring about what we believe is true. That is the very definition of creating your reality.

You are participating in creating your reality whether you know it or not. There is nothing magical or woo-woo about it. It is simply the way our brains operate. When you deny, reject, or are unaware of this, then you have very little power and will feel like the victim of your life. But with awareness comes choice. When you start to understand the process and make it work for you, now you are empowered to be in charge of the life you create.

Will there always be things that happen that are outside of your control? Yes, that is guaranteed. But what you do control is how you think and feel, and what you subsequently do about those uncontrollable events—that is how you shape and create your life. There are always people who thrive in times of crisis. Is it because they are lucky? Most likely it is because they choose to see opportunity as opposed to disadvantage.

Is it easy to break out of autopilot and take charge of this process? No. The more difficult your life has been, the harder it may seem at first. But it is doable and it's like anything else, once you get the hang of it, it gets a lot easier. And since it is your life, and no one else will ever be as invested in it as you, it's probably at least worth trying. I will end with my all-time favorite quote from Henry Ford, "Whether you think you can or think you can't, you are right."