



Attitudes and Beliefs

Introduction

Welcome to the Attitudes and Beliefs session of the *Living in Balance* program. This session focuses on your attitudes and beliefs and how they affect your reactions to life, other people, and yourself. This session will help you think through those reactions. It can also help you see how irrational beliefs can lead to wrong conclusions and unnecessary stress. It can help you examine your internal critic and review ways of reducing the power of irrational self-criticisms.

What is in this session?

This session has three major parts: (1) Importance of Attitudes and Beliefs, (2) Disputing Irrational Beliefs, and (3) Building a Positive Self-Attitude.

- ✓ After participating in part 1, you will be able to
 - understand how your attitudes and beliefs affect how you respond to stressful events.
 - understand how irrational beliefs can create unnecessary stress.
- ✓ After participating in part 2, you will be able to
 - understand how irrational beliefs lead to false conclusions and stress.



SESSION 20 HAS THREE MAJOR PARTS:

1. Importance of Attitudes and Beliefs
2. Disputing Irrational Beliefs
3. Building a Positive Self-Attitude



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 1:

You will

- understand how your attitudes and beliefs affect how you respond to stressful events.
- understand how irrational beliefs can create unnecessary stress.



DEFINITION OF STRESSORS:

Those people, places, events, rules, regulations, expectations, or requests that put some kind of demand on people.

- look at an event in your own life that caused you stress and see how you could have disputed the irrational beliefs that caused you stress.
- ✓ After participating in part 3, you will be able to
 - understand that you have an illogical internal critic.
 - learn how to challenge illogical internal criticism.
 - focus on your strengths.
 - accept things you cannot change.

What will be asked of you?

You will be asked to look at how attitudes and beliefs, especially irrational ones, can cause unnecessary stress. Doing so may be somewhat challenging, because you must confront the way in which your own thinking makes potential problems seem worse and more stressful. However, if you have the courage to look at your attitudes and beliefs, you will learn to dispute irrational beliefs and avoid one of the common causes of relapse.



Part 1: Importance of Attitudes and Beliefs

Attitudes and beliefs have a strong effect on how you understand things that happen to you. There is an old saying that a person may see a glass as half full or half empty. The person who is worried about the glass being half empty may experience more stress than the person who sees it as half full. Attitudes and perceptions can affect how you feel.

Stress and Stressors

Every stressful situation has two major parts: the stress and the stressors. *Stressors* are those people, places, events, rules, regulations, expectations, or requests that put some kind of demand on people. *Stress* is the internal reaction to those demands.

**EXERCISE 1**

Please answer the following question:

In your own words, how would you describe or define *stress* and *stressor*?

An individual's attitudes and beliefs about an event and those involved determine whether a stressor will create stress. What may be a stressor for one person may not be for someone else. For the most part, all people react in their own way and based on their background and personality.

For example, Vanessa and Joan were both ordered by a judge to attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings for one year. The judge's order could be considered a stressor.

Vanessa does not believe that she has a problem with drugs. She does not want to stop using and doesn't want any help. She doesn't want to attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings. Vanessa's internal reaction to the judge's order is anger and stress. She will go to the meetings but hate them, finding them stressful.

On the other hand, Joan believes that she has a problem with drugs and really wants to quit using. She has tried to quit before and wants to do it right this time. Joan's internal reaction to the judge's order to attend Narcotics Anonymous is one of relief, because she wants to get sober and thinks that this will help.

In this example, the potential stressor was the judge's order for Vanessa and Joan to attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings. However, Vanessa experienced stress, while Joan did not.



An individual's attitudes and beliefs about an event and those involved determine whether a stressor will create stress.

A three-step process. To a large degree, it is not events that cause stress or other feelings, but rather people's beliefs about those events. It may help to look at stressful events as a three-step process:

1. The stressor event
2. Beliefs
3. Emotional consequences

For example, the judge's order was a stressor (1). Vanessa had the belief (2) that attending the Narcotics Anonymous meetings would be a waste of time. The emotional consequences (3) were stress and anger.



EXERCISE 2

Please check the answer that seems most true:

1. Did Vanessa and Joan have to deal with the same potential stressor?
 - Yes No

2. What was Joan's internal reaction to the judge's order?
 - Anger
 - Relief
 - Fear
 - Tiredness

3. What was Vanessa's internal reaction to the judge's order?
 - Anger
 - Relief
 - Fear
 - Tiredness

Beliefs

Vanessa and Joan were both faced with the same potential stressor: the judge’s order to attend Narcotics Anonymous for one year. Because Joan felt that Narcotics Anonymous would do her some good, she did not react with stress to the judge’s order. She did not find the idea of going to Narcotics Anonymous stressful.

However, because Vanessa felt that she didn’t have a problem and didn’t want to go to Narcotics Anonymous, she reacted with both anger and stress to the judge’s order. When she went to Narcotics Anonymous, she hated it.

Despite facing the same potential stressor, Vanessa felt stress, but Joan did not. The difference between Vanessa and Joan was their beliefs. In other words, Vanessa hates Narcotics Anonymous while Joan enjoys Narcotics Anonymous because they have different beliefs about whether they have a problem with drugs, whether they need help with that problem, and whether Narcotics Anonymous can help them. In this case, what a person believes has a tremendous impact upon what he or she feels.

What a person believes has a tremendous impact upon what he or she feels.



EXERCISE 3

Please answer the following question:

Name an event that you found stressful. How might you have felt about it if you’d had other attitudes and beliefs about the situation?

Irrational Beliefs

Obviously, people have different experiences and therefore different beliefs. Importantly, people have very different beliefs about themselves. Some of these beliefs are rational and true. On the other hand, some of these beliefs are irrational and self-defeating, causing stress, anxiety, anger, guilt, and depression.

Irrational thinking is associated with the words *should*, *ought*, *must*, *always*, and *never*. For example, consider each of the following statements and respond to the questions that follow.



EXERCISE 4

Read the following statement, and then answer the questions:

“I *should* be able to understand this information better.
I *must* be stupid.”

1. Why is this statement irrational?

2. What are some rational reasons for not being able to understand the information?



Irrational thinking is associated with the words *should*, *ought*, *must*, *always*, and *never*.

3. If someone doesn't understand something, is he or she stupid?

- Yes No

Why or why not?



EXERCISE 5

Read the following statement, and then answer the questions:

“I *ought* to be able to have complete control over my emotions. I *must* be a weak person.”

1. Why is this statement irrational?

2. What are some rational reasons for not having complete control over emotions?

3. If someone doesn't have complete control over his or her emotions, does that mean he or she is a weak person?

Yes No

Why or why not?



EXERCISE 6

Read the following statement, and then answer the questions:

“I feel terrible. I got in an argument with someone at an NA meeting. I *must* learn to agree with everyone. Otherwise, people will reject me.”

1. Why is this statement irrational?

2. Can everyone learn to agree with everyone else?

Yes No

Why or why not?

3. Will people reject a person simply because they disagree with him or her?

- Yes No

Why or why not?



EXERCISE 7

Read the following statement, and then answer the questions:

“This treatment stuff is interesting, but it won’t work for me. I don’t think I can change or do things differently. I have always done it this way.”

1. Why is this statement irrational?

2. Does anyone *always* have to do something the same way?

- Yes No *(Please explain your answer.)*



EXERCISE 8

Read the following statement, and then answer the questions:

“I am so embarrassed for leaving my work at home. I *never* do anything right. I’m just not ready for treatment.”

1. Why is this statement irrational?

2. Does anyone *never* do anything right?

Yes No (*Please explain your answer.*)

3. Does this incident really mean the person is not ready for treatment?

Yes No

Why or why not?



Part 2: Disputing Irrational Beliefs

As noted before, stress, anger, guilt, and anxiety often come from people's *beliefs* about certain events. These beliefs are often *irrational*.

To stop irrational beliefs from causing stress and anxiety, you must understand that they are irrational or wrong. By disputing and challenging irrational beliefs, you can replace stressful emotional consequences with different, less stressful feelings and responses.

Consider the following example of disputing irrational beliefs:

Joe was actively addicted to drugs for more than ten years. He made several unsuccessful attempts at quitting. His wife, Darlene, pushed him to quit many times. When he was using, they had frequent arguments about his drug use. Joe is now in a drug treatment program and has been drug free for sixty days. Darlene recently started going to Nar-Anon and is seeing a therapist.

When Darlene told Joe that she was going to a therapist and to Nar-Anon meetings, Joe became very angry and depressed. He felt guilty because he felt that she was doing this because of him. He believed that if she went to Nar-Anon meetings and therapy, she would get better and leave him. He also felt that because he had hurt her when he was using, he was worthless and probably didn't deserve her love.

Joe finally had the courage to admit his true feelings to Darlene. She told Joe that she went to therapy and to Nar-Anon for her own mental health, not because she wanted to leave him.



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 2:

You will

- understand how irrational beliefs lead to false conclusions and stress.
- look at an event in your own life that caused you stress and see how you could have disputed the irrational beliefs that caused you stress.





EXERCISE 9

Please answer the following questions, which are based on the example:

1. What were Joe's stressors?

2. What were Joe's irrational beliefs?

3. How did Joe feel as a result of his beliefs about the situation with his wife?

4. How could Joe realize that his beliefs are irrational?

5. If Joe had had different beliefs about what his wife was doing, how might his feelings have been different?

Disputing Your Own Irrational Beliefs

To practice what you’ve learned in this session, try thinking about a recent problem that caused you unnecessary stress because of an irrational belief. Using what you know now about the event, answer the questions.



EXERCISE 10

Please answer the following questions:

1. What was the stressor or event? What happened?

2. What did you believe about the situation?

3. How did you feel because of this event?

4. How could you have disputed or argued against this irrational belief with yourself?

5. What would be the less stressful feeling you would have if you believed differently?



Part 3: Building a Positive Self-Attitude

Addiction affects your attitudes and beliefs in serious and negative ways. The drive for alcohol or other drugs made you say, do, and think things that you wouldn't ordinarily. Now that you are in treatment and early recovery, you may become even more aware of the ways in which you have hurt yourself and others. This awareness can make you feel bad about yourself.

But the reality is that right now, by working through this session, you are doing something good for yourself and others. Treatment is a powerful step toward emotional health. During this time, you can start working on your self-esteem.

We have what can be called *an internal critic*. Your internal critic judges you harshly. Your internal critic may tell you that you are inferior, self-centered, unattractive, unworthy of love, or hopeless. The internal critic is an irrational part of your life. The internal critic can lower your self-esteem. But you also have a rational side. Fortunately, your rational side can confront your irrational internal critic. Doing so can help to increase your self-esteem. This section will show you how.

Understand Your Internal Critic

Your irrational internal critic can be harsh and mean or blame you when things go poorly. Your internal critic may tell you that you always cause problems and that you are not good enough or smart enough. Your internal critic may tell you that you will never get better or make it through treatment.

As mean and irrational as these self-criticisms can be, they provide a form of self-protection. It may sound strange, but these irrational self-criticisms are ways in which you unconsciously try to protect yourself. The problem is that they don't work that well, and they hurt you. As a first step, it can be useful to try to understand the meaning behind irrational self-criticisms.



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 3:

You will

- understand that you have an illogical internal critic.
- learn how to challenge illogical internal criticism.
- focus on your strengths.
- accept things you cannot change.

Your internal critic judges you harshly.

Internal critic dialogue	Purpose
<i>You can't do it.</i>	Helps you avoid challenges
<i>You are stupid. Just keep quiet.</i>	Helps you avoid embarrassment
<i>She won't help you. Give up.</i>	Helps you avoid disappointment
<i>You are going to fail.</i>	Helps you seek sympathy



EXERCISE 11

Please answer the following questions:

1. Name three of your most common irrational self-criticisms.

2. In what ways do these irrational self-criticisms protect you?

3. In what ways do these irrational self-criticisms hurt you?

Challenge Your Internal Critic

There is a difference between self-criticism and irrational self-criticism. It is normal and healthy to identify something that you could do better. For instance, if you were mean to a co-worker, it would be healthy to criticize yourself. That could help you to stop being mean. But if your self-criticism was, “You never do anything right,” that would be irrational, unhealthy, and destructive.

So what do you do? A good step is to examine whether your self-criticisms are true or irrational. Most likely, they are overly exaggerated statements. When you experience a very harsh self-criticism, give it the following challenge test.

For the purpose of illustration, consider that John had an ongoing self-criticism that essentially said, “You don’t do anything right. You are a total loser. You’re not going to make it through treatment.” To deal with this self-criticism, John applies the challenge test:

- Is there any evidence that the self-criticism is true?
- Is there any evidence that the self-criticism is an exaggeration?



Examine whether your self-criticisms are true or irrational.

Ask yourself: Is there any evidence that my self-criticism is true? Is there any evidence that my self-criticism is an exaggeration?

Taking one of the self-criticisms, “You don’t do anything right,” John applies the challenge test and asks himself the following:

- *Is there any evidence that my self-criticism is true?* No. John thinks about it and realizes that although he has made mistakes, it would not be true to say that he doesn’t do *anything* right. He has done some things well and made some mistakes. Just because he has made some mistakes doesn’t mean that he doesn’t do anything right.
- *Is there any evidence that my self-criticism is an exaggeration?* Yes. John realizes that, in fact, he has done some good things. He also realizes that he has made some mistakes. Importantly, he realizes that he doesn’t give himself credit for the good things that he has done, but focuses instead on the mistakes.



EXERCISE 12

Please answer the following questions:

1. Name three of your recurring irrational self-criticisms.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

2. For the first self-criticism, explain why this self-criticism is irrational, untrue, or an exaggeration.

3. For the second self-criticism, explain why this self-criticism is irrational, untrue, or an exaggeration.

4. For the third self-criticism, explain why this self-criticism is irrational, untrue, or an exaggeration.

Challenge Illogical Self-Criticisms

As is true of the general population, many people in early recovery cling to some self-criticism that causes a lot of hurt and damage in their lives. You may have a self-criticism that you strongly and persistently hang on to. Take a few more minutes to work through your strongest self-criticism.



EXERCISE 13

Please answer the following questions:

1. What illogical self-criticism or idea do you strongly hold on to even though you are starting to recognize that this idea may be the cause of some of your problems? Explain.

(more writing space on next page)

2. What's wrong with this self-criticism? In what ways is it unrealistic, exaggerated, illogical, or unreasonable?

3. In what ways does this self-criticism control you? How does it hurt you? What are some of the negative consequences of believing in this self-criticism?

4. Does this self-criticism help you get what you want or need, or does it hurt you?

5. Do you have any proof to support this irrational self-concept?

Yes No *(Please explain your answer.)*

6. What would you say to convince another person that this illogical idea doesn't make sense?

Focus on Your Strengths

Because addiction prompts people to do things they would not ordinarily do, and because recovery prompts people to become aware of these behaviors, you may sometimes feel like you have more weaknesses than strengths. But remember, the fact that you are in treatment right now is a sign of strength.

You could use a little ego boost about now. Although simple, it's really important. You need to remember that you have many areas of strength. In fact, your treatment and recovery are going to focus on strengthening your areas of strength and on developing strengths in new areas.



**Remember that you
have many areas
of strength.**



EXERCISE 14

Please answer the following questions:

1. What are some of your areas of strength regarding relationships?

2. What are some of your areas of strength regarding your personality?

3. What are some of your areas of strength in relation to your emotional health?

4. What are some of your areas of strength in relation to your physical health?

Accept Things That Can't Be Changed

The Serenity Prayer states:

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.*

This simple prayer contains much wisdom. In relation to attitudes and beliefs, it is a reminder that life is indeed a balancing act. On one side is the importance to recognize areas where you can and should grow. On the other side is the importance to recognize things that can't be changed. The prayer is a reminder not to beat your head against the wall when faced with situations that you cannot change.

Some of the things that you cannot change will be *external*. These include other people and situations about which you do not have control. These might include laws, regulations, expectations, accusations, and broken promises. Some of the things that you cannot change will be *internal*. These might include personal limitations, personality characteristics, psychiatric diagnoses, fears, and anxieties.

For internal, personal things that cannot be changed, you have two tasks. First, you have to let it go. Second, you have to accept yourself as you are.



EXERCISE 15

Please answer the following questions:

1. Name an external thing that you cannot change. What things can you do to let go of the struggle to change it?

2. Name an internal thing that you cannot change. What things can you do to let go of the struggle to change it?

3. When you find yourself struggling with an internal thing you can't change, how can you still be good to yourself?



Session 20 Summary

In this session you have learned about the role of attitudes and beliefs in shaping your reactions to things. You have taken a look at how irrational beliefs cause people unnecessary stress, and then applied this new knowledge to a stressful situation that you had faced. You have examined your internal critic and reviewed ways of reducing the power of irrational self-criticisms.



Role-Play Exercise: Irrational Beliefs

Preparation

Two volunteers from the group will play **Latisha** and **Bernard**.
Act out the following scene:

Background and Scene

Latisha and Bernard have been dating for six months. Bernard has been in recovery from cocaine and alcohol addiction for about two years. His recovery program is fairly strong. He has had two slips, but both times he went to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting the next day, got his white chip, and got back on the program.

Latisha has a family history of alcoholism, but she doesn't know much about alcoholism or recovery. She has never been to Al-Anon or Codependents Anonymous.

Latisha and Bernard go to a party at Latisha's friend's house. Alcohol is served at the party. Bernard sees his old girlfriend, Tracy, at the party, and he gets very nervous. The last time he saw Tracy, he got into a big fight with Latisha. Bernard holds his feelings and does not tell Latisha that he feels nervous and wants to leave. To calm his nerves, he has a drink, then several, and then a severe cocaine craving. At that point, he tells Latisha that he needs to leave. They argue, but leave.

The next day, Bernard realizes that he has to strengthen his recovery program and deal with his inability to talk about his feelings. He decides that he needs to go to ninety meetings in ninety days in order to stop his slip from becoming a relapse.

A few days later, Bernard returns from a meeting. Latisha is on the couch feeling guilty and depressed. Bernard feels good about going to a meeting and being able to talk about his feelings. Latisha feels guilty because she thinks that she caused Bernard's slip. She also thinks that Bernard is going to meetings every day because he wants to get away from her. They are both scared in their own way.



Irrational Beliefs

Continued

Suggested Questions

1. *In this role-play exercise, what are Latisha's stressors? Are they real stressors? Would it cause stress in the average person?*
2. *In this exercise, what are Latisha's irrational beliefs?*
3. *What Twelve Step activity can Latisha participate in to diminish her irrational beliefs?*
4. *In this exercise, what could Bernard say to Latisha specifically about his difficulty talking about his feelings during high-risk times?*