

Worksheet 4.13 ABCDE Disputation (Seligman, 2002) Instructions

There are several key differences between how pessimistic and optimistic people tend to think about the bad and good things that happen to them (Seligman, 1991, 1998; Seligman et al., 1995). More specifically, people who are optimistic make external, variable, and specific attributions for failure-like events rather than the internal, stable, and global attributions made by pessimists. For example, a person who is optimistic will explain a relationship breakup as being due to a poor match between herself and her partner (external), and something that is unlikely to happen in her next relationship (variable), as this negative event is confined to this particular relationship (specific). In contrast, a pessimistic person in the same situation is likely to view the breakup as her fault because she was not pretty enough, caring enough, or good at opening up to other people (internal), and she will predict that such a poor outcome is likely to occur in future relationships (stable), as this negative event is likely to be repeated should she even find another person to connect with (global). When it comes to explaining successful events or outcomes, the optimist will attribute the success to internal, stable, and global factors while the pessimist will explain his or her success as the result of external, variable, and specific attributions.

Learning to consider alternative explanations for adverse events and to choose the one that is most variable and specific (rather than stable and global) is key to increasing optimism. In order to be able to effectively dispute your thoughts and beliefs in a variety of situations, you can set out to find concrete evidence that your beliefs are faulty. Becoming skilled at arguing with yourself is the key to the ABCDE technique (Seligman, 2002).

In order to effectively dispute your own pessimistic thoughts, you must first be able to recognize them and then to treat these thoughts as if someone else had said them to you. Indeed, we are often better able to dispute what other people say to us than what we say to ourselves (Seligman, 2002). One way to argue with yourself when you identify a pessimistic belief is to ask yourself the questions: “What is the evidence for the belief?” and “What alternative ways can I look at this situation?” When you identify a pessimistic belief that is warranted, you might then ask yourself “What does this negative event really mean – is the outcome as negative as I am making it out to be?” or ask yourself “How useful is it for me to dwell on this negative event or belief?” (Seligman, 2002).

In this exercise you are being asked to pay attention to any Adverse experiences that you have over the course of the next few weeks that lead you to think like a pessimist. Next, write down your **B**eliefs about the adverse events and the **C**onsequences of these pessimistic beliefs. Then vigorously **D**ispute your current beliefs in order to feel more **E**nergized and optimistic

about the adversities. If you find it difficult to dispute the thoughts on your own, turning to a friend or a loved one for help in finding the disputation may be helpful. Please record at least five disputation examples in the spaces provided below.

Two examples of completed ABCDE disputation records are provided below for your reference. The first example is about a bad event and the second is about a good event.

Example 1: Negative event

Adversity: I received a negative review from my boss at work. She said that I am not outgoing enough to work the sales floor and therefore is going to have me work in the stockroom instead.

Beliefs: I have been working really hard and obviously it does not matter. I hate my boss and this stupid job. I don't want to see her or anyone at work for that matter. I am fed up with the whole thing.

Consequences: I got my review two days ago and am still furious. I really want to tell my boss off and then quit so that she can deal with covering my hours for the next week. I called in sick already yesterday since I could not fathom seeing her. I don't know what I am going to do tomorrow though. I am scheduled to work a double shift and don't have any more sick days left.

Disputation: Although I think my boss could have been more fair in my review, she is probably right that my personality is not as naturally outgoing as many of the other salespeople. I am not always comfortable talking to all of the customers and that probably shows through, but at the same time, I am not completely incapable as she made it seem. I guess she must see this on some level since she still wants me to work there, just in a different position. If she really disliked me, she could have just fired me. Maybe I am taking this too personally. I really do like my colleagues and the pay is pretty good. I guess in the stockroom I will have more time to interact with my colleagues and I don't have to worry so much about my wardrobe. Professional work clothes are expensive!

Energization: I feel much less angry. I am still a little bothered by how the review focused only on the negatives, but I know my boss had a lot of reviews to do that day so she was probably just trying to conserve time. It was hard to admit that I am not as

outgoing as some of my colleagues, but I do realize that this is the case. I am actually looking forward to spending more time with my colleagues in the stock room and not feeling so on edge all the time.

Example 2: Positive event

Adversity: I wrote a paper for my English class and my professor thought it was excellent. He asked me to write another paper to submit for a writing competition. The winner of the competition will have his or her work published nationally.

Beliefs: Oh my goodness. I am terrified! I am not that good of a writer. I just got lucky on that last paper. There is no way that I am going to be able to write anything even close to being competitive with all the other entries. I am going to utterly disappoint my professor and probably end up with a poor grade in this class as a result. I wish he had never asked me to do this.

Consequences: I have writer's block and feel sick to my stomach. I don't even know where to begin. I just want to forget all about this.

Disputation: Wait a minute here, would a professor really tell me how good my work is if that were not true? What reason would he have for doing that? He has been teaching for almost 25 years so surely has seen a lot of papers and if he thinks mine is exceptional, then maybe it actually is. I have always gotten good grades in my English classes and on my papers for other classes too. Maybe I am not giving myself enough credit here. I already committed to doing this so I should just follow through. Even if I don't win, it will be a good experience to at least try.

Energization: I feel much more relaxed and able to think more clearly. I think I am over my writer's block too. I have a good idea of the topic I will write on and am going to head to the library right now to get a few more resources.

Please make at least five copies of the following chart in order to record at least five instances of ABCDE disputation in your own life.

ABCDE Disputation Record**Adversity:****Beliefs:****Consequences:****Disputation:****Energization:**