



The ABC Pattern For Reactions

Something happens.

Someone criticizes us. Our partner's tone changes. A friend doesn't return a text. We make a mistake at work. Our child disappoints us. We walk into a room and feel ignored. We receive an unexpected bill. Someone disagrees with us. We lie awake at night thinking about tomorrow.

And then we react.

We become anxious, angry, embarrassed, discouraged, defensive, hurt, ashamed, or overwhelmed. Sometimes we withdraw. Sometimes we argue. Sometimes we lie awake replaying the situation. Sometimes we avoid whatever made us uncomfortable. Sometimes our mood changes for the remainder of the day without our completely understanding why.

It can seem as though the event *caused* the reaction.

This happened, therefore I felt this way.

But there is usually something important happening in between.

We **interpret** what happened.

We decide what it means.

And sometimes that meaning has far more influence over us than the original event.

Psychology has traditionally described this through something called the **ABC Model**: an **Activating Event**, our **Beliefs** about the event, and the emotional and behavioral **Consequences** that follow.

That language is useful, but we can make it much simpler.

Something happened.

I told myself what it meant.

Something happened inside me next.

Understanding that middle step—the meaning we give an experience—can change almost everything.

A — Something Happened

The **A** in the ABC model stands for *Activating Event*.

That simply means something happened that got our emotional system going.

Your partner walks into the house and barely speaks to you.

Your boss says, “I’d like to talk with you tomorrow.”

Someone you care about doesn’t respond to your message.

You are invited somewhere and discover you don’t know anyone.

You make a mistake.

You look at your bank account.

You remember something painful from your past.

You think about something that might happen tomorrow.

An activating event does not even have to be something happening outside of us. A memory, thought, physical sensation, or prediction can activate us just as powerfully as an actual event.

But here is where things become interesting.

Two people can experience almost exactly the same event and have completely different emotional reactions.

Imagine two people walking into a gathering where they don’t know anyone.

One thinks:

“This could be fun. Maybe I’ll meet someone interesting.”

The other thinks:

“I’m going to look awkward. Nobody is going to want to talk to me.”

Same room.

Same situation.

Very different experience.

Why?

Because something happened between the **event** and the **emotion**.

B — What Did I Make It Mean?

This is the part we often miss.

The **B** traditionally stands for *Beliefs*, but beliefs are much more than philosophical ideas about life. They include the running interpretations, assumptions, expectations, predictions, rules, and conclusions through which we understand what is happening.

In everyday language:

What did I tell myself this meant?

Your partner is quiet.

“They’re tired.”

Or:

“They’re angry with me.”

Your boss wants to talk tomorrow.

“Probably something about the new project.”

Or:

“I’m in trouble.”

Someone doesn't respond to your message.

“They’re probably busy.”

Or:

“They're ignoring me.”

Notice something important.

The **event hasn't changed.**

The meaning has.

And when the meaning changes, what happens inside us can change dramatically.

Sometimes the Meaning Was Learned Long Ago

This is where the ABC model becomes particularly important within the UNpsych framework.

We don't create our interpretations from nothing.

We bring a history into the present moment.

Someone who experienced a great deal of criticism may become especially sensitive to signs of disapproval.

Someone who repeatedly experienced rejection may quickly notice anything that resembles being excluded.

Someone who grew up around unpredictable anger may become highly alert to changes in another person's tone of voice.

Someone who learned that mistakes brought humiliation may experience an ordinary mistake as something much larger than the mistake itself.

Over time we develop beliefs about ourselves, other people, relationships, safety, success, failure, love, and what we must do to protect ourselves.

I have to keep everyone happy.

I can't make mistakes.

People eventually leave.

If someone is upset with me, I have to fix it.

I can't let people see weakness.

I'm not good enough.

I have to stay in control.

These beliefs can become part of the internal network through which new experiences are interpreted.

Eventually we may stop recognizing them as beliefs.

They simply feel like **reality**.

C — What Happened Next?

The **C** stands for *Consequences*.

That word can sound as though we are talking about punishment. We aren't.

Consequences simply means **what happened inside us and what we did next**.

Suppose your partner seems unusually quiet.

A — Activating Event

My partner is quiet tonight.

B — Belief or Meaning

"They're upset with me. I must have done something wrong."

C — Consequence

I become anxious. I repeatedly ask what is wrong. They say, "Nothing," but I don't believe them. I continue asking questions. Eventually they become irritated.

Now something fascinating has happened.

The original event was simply:

My partner was quiet.

But the interpretation created anxiety, the anxiety influenced behavior, and the behavior may eventually create the very relationship tension we feared.

This is how emotional patterns can become self-reinforcing.

The Story Can Become the Reaction

Consider another example.

A

A friend doesn't return my message.

B

“Apparently I'm not very important to them.”

C

I feel hurt and rejected, so I stop contacting them.

Now imagine a different belief.

A

A friend doesn't return my message.

B

“They're probably busy. I'll check in later.”

C

I continue with my day.

Same event.

Different interpretation.

Different emotional experience.

Different behavior.

Possibly a completely different relationship outcome.

This does **not** mean every difficult emotion is caused by distorted thinking. Sometimes someone really is rejecting us. Sometimes our partner really is angry. Sometimes our boss really does have bad news. Sometimes people behave badly.

The goal is not to replace every uncomfortable thought with a positive one.

The goal is to become curious about the **middle**.

UNcover the Middle

Most of us notice the event and the reaction.

This happened → I became angry.

She said this → I became hurt.

He did that → I became anxious.

I failed → I became ashamed.

UNpsych asks us to slow the sequence down.

Something happened.

What did I make it mean?

What happened inside me because of that meaning?

Once we see the middle, we have somewhere to work.

The UNpsych ABC Reset

Think about a recent situation that created a strong emotional reaction.

A — What Happened?

Describe only what actually happened, almost as though a camera recorded it.

Try not to include your interpretation yet.

What happened?

What was actually said or done?

B — What Did I Make It Mean?

Now move underneath the event.

What was my first thought?

What did I assume was happening?

What did I believe this said about me?

What did I believe it said about the other person or situation?

What was I afraid might happen next?

Now go one layer deeper.

Complete whichever statements seem relevant:

- **I told myself:** _____
- **I assumed:** _____
- **I was afraid that:** _____
- **I expected:** _____

- The situation seemed to prove: _____
 - The rule in my head was: _____
-

C — What Happened Next?

Now notice what the belief produced.

What emotion did I experience?

How strong was it?

_____ / 10

What happened in my body?

What did I feel like doing?

What did I actually do?

What happened because of my reaction?

UNderstand: Where Did That Belief Come From?

This may be the most revealing part of the exercise.

Instead of immediately asking whether your belief was “right” or “wrong,” become curious about why your mind went there.

Why did this particular situation affect me so strongly?

Have I had this reaction before?

What other situations trigger something similar?

Does this connect with something I learned earlier in life?

What might I have learned about myself?

What might I have learned about other people?

What did I learn I had to do to protect myself?

This is often where an automatic reaction begins to make more sense.

Perhaps the belief wasn't irrational at all when it developed.

Maybe it once helped you anticipate danger, avoid rejection, gain approval, prevent conflict, or protect yourself emotionally.

The more useful question becomes:

Do I still need to interpret situations this way today?

UNlearn: Challenge the Meaning, Not the Feeling

You do not have to argue with your feelings.

Instead, examine the belief underneath them.

Ask yourself:

- **What facts support my interpretation?**
- **What facts don't support it?**
- **Am I treating an assumption as a fact?**
- **Am I predicting something that hasn't happened?**
- **Am I deciding what someone else thinks without asking them?**
- **Am I turning one event into a statement about my entire life or identity?**
- **Could an old experience be influencing how I am interpreting a new one?**
- **Is there another explanation that fits the facts?**

Now write a more balanced interpretation.

Another way I could understand this situation is:

Not necessarily:

“Everything is wonderful.”

But perhaps:

“I don't have enough information yet.”

“One mistake doesn't define me.”

“Someone being disappointed with me doesn't mean I am a disappointment.”

“Their mood may not be about me.”

“This is uncomfortable, but uncomfortable does not mean dangerous.”

“I can wait until I know more.”

That is not positive thinking.

It is **clearer thinking**.

Become: Choose What Happens Next

Once we separate the event from the meaning we gave it, another possibility appears.

Choice.

Ask yourself:

If I didn't automatically believe my first interpretation, what would I do differently?

How would the person I want to become handle this situation?

What response would reflect my values rather than my fear, anger, shame, or old protective pattern?

What will I choose to do next?

The ABC Week Challenge

Seven Days of Catching the Middle

For the next week, don't try to change every thought you have. Simply become a student of your own internal network.

Each day, catch **one ABC sequence**.

Day 1 — Catch the Event

Notice something that changes your emotional state.

Write down only what happened without explaining what you think it meant.

A: _____

Day 2 — Catch the Story

Notice something that bothers you and ask:

“What am I telling myself this means?”

A: _____

B: _____

Day 3 — Follow the Chain

Catch the entire sequence.

What happened?

What did I make it mean?

What did I feel and do next?

Day 4 — Catch an Assumption

Today notice one moment when you think you know something that you don't actually know.

Perhaps you are predicting the future, assuming someone's motives, or deciding what another person thinks.

My assumption was: _____

What I actually know is: _____

Day 5 — Find an Old Belief

Catch a familiar message about yourself.

I'm not good enough.

People don't respect me.

I have to keep everyone happy.

I can't handle conflict.

I have to be perfect.

I'm going to fail.

My familiar belief is:

Where might I have learned it?

How has it affected my choices?

Day 6 — Write Another Ending

Take one ABC pattern from this week and change the middle.

A — What happened?

Old B — What I automatically believed:

New B — A more balanced interpretation:

New C — How might I respond differently?

Day 7 — Become

Look across the week.

What belief showed up most often?

What emotion did it tend to create?

What behavior usually followed?

Is this pattern helping me become the person I want to be?

What belief or reaction am I ready to begin UNlearning?

What do I want to choose instead?

What Happened Is Not Always What It Meant

We cannot control everything that happens to us.

People will disappoint us. We will make mistakes. Relationships will become complicated. Plans will fail. Some people will misunderstand us. Life will occasionally frighten us, frustrate us, hurt us, and surprise us.

But between **what happens** and **what we do next**, there is often a largely invisible world of meaning.

That world deserves our attention.

Because sometimes we discover that we are not only responding to what happened today.

We are responding to what today's experience awakened yesterday.

An old belief.

An old fear.

An old expectation.

An old way of protecting ourselves.

And once we can see that pattern, we are no longer quite as trapped inside it.

We can UNcover the event that activated us.

We can UNDERstand the belief through which we interpreted it.

We can UNlearn meanings and protective reactions that no longer serve us.

And we can Become more intentional about what happens next.

The goal isn't to control every thought or eliminate every difficult emotion.

It is something much more achievable:

Learn to catch the middle.

Because what happened matters.

But what we believe it means can determine much of what happens next.

UNcover what is controlling you.

UNDERstand its power over you.

UNlearn what you no longer need.

Become who you choose to be.