

Filling in Thought Holes: An Invaluable Social and Emotional Learning Lesson

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"I didn't get invited to Craig's party . . . I'm such a loser."

"I missed the bus . . . nothing ever goes my way."

"My math teacher wants to see me . . . I must be in trouble."

These are the thoughts of a high school student named Jeremy. You wouldn't know it from his thoughts, but Jeremy is actually pretty popular and gets decent grades. Unfortunately, in the face of adversity, Jeremy makes a common error; he falls into "thought holes." Thought holes, or cognitive distortions, are skewed perceptions of reality. They are negative interpretations of a situation based on poor assumptions. For Jeremy, thought holes cause intense emotional distress. Although all kids blow things out of proportion or jump to conclusions at times, distorting reality is not innocuous. Studies show that thought holes can provoke self-defeating ideas (i.e., "I'm a loser") that trigger self-defeating emotions (i.e., pain, anxiety, malaise) that, in turn, cause self-defeating actions (i.e., acting out, skipping school). Left unchecked, inaccurate thoughts can also lead to more severe conditions, such as depression. Fortunately, with a brief social and emotional learning lesson, we can teach students how to fill in their thought holes and view the world in a more accurate light. The lesson begins with an understanding of what causes distortions of reality.

We Create Our Own (Often Distorted) Reality

One person walks down a busy street and notices graffiti on the wall, dirt on the pavement and a couple fighting. Another person walks down the same street and notices a refreshing breeze, an ice cream cart and a smile from a stranger. We each absorb select scenes in our environment through which we interpret a situation. In essence, we create our own reality by that to which we give attention. Why don't we just interpret situations based on all of the information? It's not possible; there are simply too many stimuli to process. In fact, the subconscious mind can absorb 20 million bits of information through the five senses in a mere second. By intelligent design, data is filtered down so that the conscious mind focuses on only 7 to 40 bits. This is a mental shortcut. Shortcuts keep us sane by preventing sensory overload. Shortcuts help us judge situations quickly. Shortcuts also, however, leave us vulnerable to errors in perception. Because we perceive reality based on a tiny sliver of information, if that information is unbalanced (e.g., ignores the positive and focuses on the negative), we are left with a skewed perception of reality, or a thought hole.

Eight Common Thought Holes

Not only are we susceptible to errors in thinking, but we also tend to make the same errors over and over again. The next part of the lesson outlines these common thought holes; this familiarity makes it easier for students to identify and avoid distortions in the future. Seminal work by psychologist Aaron Beck, often referred to as the father of cognitive therapy, and his former student, David Burns, uncovered several common thought holes as seen below.

1. **Jumping to conclusions:** judging a situation based on assumptions as opposed to definitive facts
2. **Mental filtering:** paying attention to the negative details in a situation while ignoring the positive
3. **Magnifying:** magnifying negative aspects in a situation
4. **Minimizing:** minimizing positive aspects in a situation
5. **Personalizing:** assuming the blame for problems even when you are not primarily responsible
6. **Externalizing:** pushing the blame for problems onto others even when you are primarily responsible
7. **Overgeneralizing:** concluding that one bad incident will lead to a repeated pattern of defeat
8. **Emotional reasoning:** assuming your negative emotions translate into reality, or confusing feelings with facts

Filling in Thought Holes with the 3Cs

Once students understand why one falls into thought holes and that several common ones exist, they are ready to start filling them in! When faced with adversity, students can evaluate thoughts using the 3Cs:

- *Check* for common thought holes
- *Collect* evidence to paint an accurate picture
- *Challenge* the original thoughts

Let's run through the 3Cs using Jeremy as an example. Jeremy was recently asked by his math teacher to chat after class. He immediately thought, "I must be in trouble," and began to feel distressed. Using the 3Cs, Jeremy should first *check* to see if he had fallen into one of the common thought holes. Based on the list above, it seems he jumped to a conclusion. Jeremy's next step is to *collect* as much data or evidence as possible to create a more accurate picture of the situation. His evidence may look something like the following statements: "I've always received good grades in math class." "Teachers sometimes ask you to chat after class when something is wrong." "I've never been in trouble before." "The math teacher has always been kind to me." "The math teacher didn't seem upset when he asked me to chat." With all the evidence at hand, Jeremy can now *challenge* his original thought. **The best (and most entertaining) way to do this is for Jeremy to have a debate with himself. On one side is the Jeremy who believes he is in big trouble with his math teacher; on the other side is the Jeremy who believes that nothing is really wrong.** On paper or mentally, Jeremy could use the evidence he collected to duke it out with himself! In the end, this type of disputation increases accurate thinking and improves emotional well being. In this lesson, students learn that thoughts, even distorted ones, affect their emotional well being. They learn that accurate thinking is a tool to redress or avoid thought holes. Above all, they learn that one can choose which thoughts to focus on, and in this, there is power. As the pioneering psychologist and philosopher, William James, once said, **"The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another."**