It’s All About Perspective

The reality of our lives is all about perspective and our perspective is based on our own personal thoughts. One person walks down the hallway at school and notices graffiti, garbage on the ground and other students whispering and rolling their eyes. Another person walks down that exact same hallway at the same time and notices smiles and laughter in conversation, a kind look from a stranger, and the delicious smell of cinnamon rolls from the cafeteria. 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. We cannot process all the information of what is going on around us, but we do choose what we focus on. Here are some common negative thought traps we all get sucked into at times. If we can identify them we can possibly combat them.

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.
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.

Once you are able to recognize common thought traps you can now do something about them. Simply use the 3 C’s, Check, Collect, Challenge. First, Check for thought traps. When you are in a situation, ask yourself “could this be a thought trap”. Collect real evidence to see if you can paint a more accurate picture. Look at the situation clearly and objectively to see if there is any real evidence that supports your thought or debunks your thought. Last, Challenge your original thoughts. Try to debate and assess what is most accurate and logical.

Let’s put this to a test. Dani’s teacher requests that she comes see him after school and she immediately assumes she is in trouble. When Dani recognizes this is a thought trap she can then try the three C’s. Check and see could this be a thought trap? Why yes it could be. Then Collect evidence. The teacher never said she was in trouble. Teachers often do call students in to talk when they are in trouble. The teacher did not seem upset. Dani has never been in trouble before. With all this evidence Dani can now Challenge her original thought.
might want to take a minute and have a personal debate with themselves to “duke it out”. Now she can make a more accurate thought about the events.

Thought traps 2, 3, and 4 have in the past been a trap I often engage in. As I have recognized them by Checking, then Collecting evidence, and finally Challenged them, I have found some great improvements in my life. Remaining positive and trying to search for the positive in every situation has been a personal lifesaver for me. I used to find myself stuck in magnifying the negative while minimizing the positive in every situation. This never brought anything good into my life. However, when I switched that and really began to focus on the positives while downplaying the negatives, my life has become more enriched and meaningful. This isn’t necessarily easy to do but can become a way of life, and that way of life is dramatically an improved way of life.

Let’s teach our teens that thoughts, even distorted ones, affect their emotional well-being. Let’s teach them to have more accurate thoughts. Above all, let’s teach our teens that they have the power to choose their thoughts. “The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another”, William James (a psychologist and philosopher).