

## **Examine your unrealistic standards**

In the last chapter, we covered the danger of holding preconceived expectations about the future and comparing what actually happens to what you want to happen. You've learned how not to let expectations control your life and prevent you from being open to different possibilities and outcomes.

Now let's take a look at which thoughts these expectations stem from, and how you can change the "benchmark" by which you judge. This has been one of the most life-changing concepts about mental habits and stress alleviation that I've ever encountered, and I believe it's going to make a big difference in your life, too.

### **Four types of standards**

If you find yourself easily irritated with small interruptions and hassles, or notice that you hold on to bigger setbacks and just can't let go, it's likely due to unrealistic standards. You can trace almost *every*

instance of anxiety or stress back to your beliefs about what must and must not be happening in your life.

Standards (called "benchmarks" by Dr. Julian Simon) can be divided into four categories:<sup>40</sup>

- ✓ **Something you feel obligated to do but haven't done:**
  - I should be caught up on my grading.
  - I am supposed to be the kind of teacher Mrs. Reynolds is.
  - I must stop bringing so much work home.
  
- ✓ **Something you were accustomed to, but no longer have:**
  - I ought to have smaller class sizes like I used to.
  - I should have the freedom to teach the way I want again.
  - I shouldn't have to test all the time these days.
  
- ✓ **Something you're working toward and/or hoping for:**
  - I should be recognized as Teacher of the Year.
  - I have to get an out-of-classroom position or I'll go crazy.
  - I must not have any students score as less than proficient.
  
- ✓ **Something you expected but didn't get:**
  - I should have been assigned the gifted class this year.
  - I ought to have gotten a pay raise.
  - I shouldn't have had to stay late for staff development.

I think every teacher can relate to at least a few of these sentiments and the feelings of frustration that accompany them. These are examples of how most unhappiness is caused by repeatedly dwelling on our standards of how things are supposed to be. The solution is to identify those thoughts of *should*, *have to*, *ought*, and *must* and replace them with less extreme, more accurate beliefs.<sup>41</sup>

## Challenging your *musts* and *shoulds*

See if you can recall a time when you tried to teach a lesson but students were off-task, playing around, and constantly interrupting. Now here's the hard part—can you determine what your automatic thoughts were during that instance? Maybe you found yourself getting exasperated because you were thinking things like, *These kids are driving me crazy! It's impossible to teach when they're like this! I hate when they act this way!*

Those thoughts stem from certain beliefs about what teaching and learning should be like. Ask yourself, "What standards (*shoulds* and *musts*) are causing me to get aggravated when students are off-task?" Notice the question doesn't assume that students' *behavior* disturbed you. Their behavior was a contributing factor to your irritation, but it was not that alone—it was also your beliefs about their behavior that created feelings of annoyance. Inappropriate student conduct is a challenge to belief systems and standards like:

"I HAVE to get through this entire lesson today!"

"I MUST NOT be interrupted when I'm teaching!"

"Students SHOULD be attentive and respectful 100% of the time!"

"I SHOULDN'T have to deal with any misbehavior!"

Each of these statements is understandable, but actually quite irrational. Insisting that such standards be met will cause feelings of frustration and anger. Try to challenge your beliefs with more accurate thinking:

"I would prefer to get through this entire lesson today, but if I don't, it's not the end of the world. I can only do my best."

"I dislike being interrupted, but it's guaranteed to happen sometimes. That's part of life, and certainly part of teaching."

"I would like for students to be generally attentive, but no one is on-task 100% of the time (including me.) It's unrealistic to expect an entire class of children to all be completely focused during every single lesson."

"I dislike handling misbehavior, but that's part of my job as a teacher. It's my role to enforce consequences and help students develop self-discipline."

Can you see how each of these statements is more accurate? Rational thoughts line up with what you experience in the world. Irrational thoughts are based on what you believe the world should be like. Frustration occurs when you attempt to make reality conform to your beliefs about it. Since it's impossible to make everything and everyone conform to your standards, attempting to do so invites negative emotions. It's far easier to change your standards than to change the way everyone around you meets them.<sup>42</sup>

Is the implication that you should just be satisfied with the status quo and stop striving to make things better? Should you stop addressing flaws and shortcomings in the people and systems around you? Is it better to just let students behave any way they want?

Absolutely not! Having standards causes a problem only when you refuse to accept things the way they are, and get so caught up in your "supposed to" beliefs that you experience extreme aggravation and anger. When you *insist* that a certain standard is met and it's not, you can cling to your irrational beliefs and upset yourself, or you can reframe the situation in your mind.

## **Reframing irrational beliefs about teaching**

See if you recognize any of the following statements from your own thoughts and conversations:

"I MUST get all my kids to pass the standardized tests. I can't handle knowing that any of them failed!"

"I SHOULDN'T have to take work home in the evenings. The amount of overtime in this job is unreasonable and unbearable."

"I HAVE TO get all the papers on my desk in order right now. I hate leaving my desk a mess. Why am I so disorganized?"

"I SHOULD BE integrating technology in every lesson. But I just can't keep up with all this new stuff! It makes me feel like a terrible teacher. I'm leaving all my kids totally unprepared for the future."

"I CANNOT let any student get away with not turning in work. If I don't hold the kids accountable every time, they're going to be irresponsible adults. I can't let any infractions slide and must always be consistent!"

"I MUST NOT say anything unprofessional in a parent conference when I explain that a child is working below grade level. If I use the wrong words, the parents will think I'm incompetent and stupid. They'll be furious and blame me."

Each of these beliefs sets you up to be stressed when life doesn't work the way you want. Here are some reframed perspectives that are more rational:

"I would like for all my kids to pass the standardized tests, but I cannot control that. It would be disappointing if some of them didn't meet proficiency, but it doesn't mean I'm a failure or that they didn't learn anything in my class."

"I would prefer not to take work home in the evenings. Realistically, I know it will need to be done sometimes because that's the nature of this job. I don't enjoy it, but I can handle it. There is no law in life that says every aspect of my job must be both fun and completed in full by 3 p.m."

"I dislike having a messy desk, but it's not catastrophic if I occasionally leave work with papers strewn all over. It's okay if I fix

them in the morning sometimes. Having a messy desk does not mean I'm ineffective at my job. It will also not prevent me from getting things done in the morning unless I choose to get frustrated about it."

"I would like to integrate technology more often, mostly because the district requires it. But using a limited amount of technology doesn't make me a 'bad' teacher. I excel in other areas. I'm doing the best I can right now with the time, resources, and knowledge I have."

"I would prefer to enforce a consequence every time a student doesn't turn in work, but I don't have to hold myself to that standard. I accept that I will accidentally overlook an incident on occasion, or be too busy to confer with a student about it. There's no reason to believe that my singular oversight will cause kids to become irresponsible adults."

"It would be unpleasant if I had a hard time explaining myself during a parent conference. That could make it harder for the parent to understand where I'm coming from. But it wouldn't be horrible or terrible—what overdramatic terms! No one is perfectly articulate all the time, and I can't expect that of myself. Even if the parents disapprove of me, I will still survive, and I will continue to be a good teacher to the kids."

## **What about administration's MUSTs?**

Many of the "supposed to" beliefs that permeate teachers' minds are things the education system has trained us to believe. We are constantly told there is only one acceptable outcome for us and our students: an extremely high rate of success and/or mastery within ALL tasks and subject areas. Sometimes the standard is 100%—total perfection! This naturally produces a stress response because it's impossible to live up to that expectation and equally impossible to make our students live up to it.

However, even school mandates can become *preferred* instead of *musts*. You don't have to internalize commands like, "You MUST

enter your data by Friday! You MUST demonstrate progress for every student!" Directives are phrased like that because it's preposterous to say, "We'd prefer you to enter your data by Friday, but do it whenever it's convenient. There's no deadline so you can put it off until next year—or never!—if you want. And we'd like to see progress for every child, but if some kids don't learn anything, that's cool, too."

Administrators have to set boundaries and limits. I've known a few who are conscious of the amount of pressure that "must statements" place on teachers, but most are not, and are trying desperately to keep their heads above water with their own demanding supervisors. Like it or not, school leaders haven't necessarily risen to their current positions because they're good at managing staff, so don't stress yourself out over the way they convey requests! Though we would prefer every supervisor to have strong interpersonal skills, that is not reality, and we can cope with it.

Practice translating in your mind when the standards imposed on you cause anxiety or frustration. If inputting data by Friday isn't stressful, then stick with the *musts*. But if you feel like freaking out because there's no way you'll get it done in time, then reframe the expectation so it's more realistic:

"The superintendent wants me to get my data inputted this week. What *musts* have I created for myself that are actually just preferred tasks? I told myself that I *had to* change my bulletin boards this week, but that's a preference. I could do it next week if needed. I prefer to get the data inputted on time, so I'll do that instead. And even if I don't get it done on time, it wouldn't be the end of my career. No person follows every single order from their boss exactly when and how the boss wants it. I'm not going to lose my job if the data isn't entered until Monday."

"The reading specialist has instructed me to document progress for every single child in reading even though three of my kids are still on the same level as last month. I would prefer to comply with this. However, I cannot force a child to learn to read faster. I will document everything I can to show that I'm doing my best to teach, and that's all. If the reading specialist—who has to examine the entire school's data in her "free time" between teaching small groups—happens to notice that three children in my class are still on the same reading level, she probably won't even mention it. And if she does, it will not destroy my reputation. I'm quite sure other teachers are in the same predicament with their classes. This is not as horrible as I'm making it out to be."

The idea here is not to devalue the importance of the tasks at hand, but to de-escalate your stress response to them. This is important because many educators are people pleasers with high personal standards. We were often excellent students ourselves, and espouse the importance of following the rules and making sure things get done properly. We don't like people to be mad at us, especially when we're trying our best, and we want to be thought of highly by our supervisors.

Therefore, we tend to imagine that the consequences for not meeting our own standards (or the ones other people impose on us) are extremely dire. We live in constant fear of something bad happening because we did not complete our jobs perfectly in every way. A casual request to stop by the principal's office after school fills our hearts with panic as we imagine what we could've possibly been caught doing wrong. We allow our minds to imagine all sorts of things that could happen if we don't fill out every form on time, file every paper in its perfect place, and conduct every single lesson with nine types of documented differentiation techniques.

If you struggle with this perfectionism, remind yourself that your standards are unrealistic and so are your imagined outcomes. The truth is that your shortcomings usually have far fewer consequences than your mind can dream up. Even with thirty years of experience under your belt, a perfectionistic mindset will ensure that you'll never be able to do everything the way YOU think you ought to. And yet your students will be none the wiser and continue to thrive! Don't be so hard on yourself that you can't enjoy the job. Fight your paranoia and self-imposed pressure by challenging your irrational standards.

## **Dealing with the daily assaults on your standards**

You'll notice that the rational counter to irrational standards always uses less extreme language. When you use words like *horrible*, *terrible*, and *awful*, what you're implying to yourself is that the situation is uncommonly bad and should not exist.<sup>43</sup> Though you might in fact think your condition is especially dire, to insist that something must not or should not happen to you is unreasonable and leads to much unhappiness.

No matter how obnoxious, annoying, or inconvenient you find a circumstance, it exists! It IS happening! And you CAN stand it, because you are! At their core, irrational "supposed to" beliefs are selfish, naïve, and immature. Be firm with yourself and logical as you counter each type of unrealistic standard:

**Something you feel obligated to do but haven't done:** *I feel like I should be the first one to arrive at school in the morning and the last one to leave. I'm always wanting to prove my dedication, and then today I showed up twenty minutes late because I overslept! I'm tempted to beat myself up over it and insist I should never be late, but I'm going to remind myself that I'm holding an unrealistic standard. I don't have to be perfect in order to be*

*effective. I will not lose my job because I was twenty minutes late to school one time. No one even noticed. My principal will not hate me if she finds out. Even if she was an irrational person and did start treating me differently because of it, I know that I'm a good teacher, and that I'm responsible and reliable. If she or anyone else chooses to hold me to an unrealistic standard, that's their problem! I'm not internalizing their issues! I'm going to focus my energy on doing my job well in this moment.*

**Something you were accustomed to, but no longer have:** *It's hard to accept this new school policy because it doesn't make any sense to me. I keep thinking about how idiotic it seems! But repeatedly thinking about how the school used to be run is just a way that I try to hold on to my unrealistic standard that things should stay the same. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" is my perspective. But someone else obviously believed the policy WAS broken. And that's okay. The school system employs people with a wide variety of thought systems and beliefs. Why SHOULD their requirements make sense to me? We're not coming from the same perception of reality. And I'm not logical all the time; there's no reason to expect people who create mandates to be logical all the time. Why should I be thrown off guard when we're told to do something that seems senseless to me? I'm going to let go of my standard and accept that policies sometimes change. I don't like it, but I don't have to expend so much energy thinking about it.*

**Something you're working toward and/or hoping for:** *I'm so tired of constantly repeating myself for these kids. Every day, all day long, we practice these routines and procedures so they'll do what they're supposed to do automatically, and they still don't have it right! They just aren't at the point I'd like them to be. Wait—that means I'm comparing other people's actions to my own standard and upsetting myself when they don't meet it. There's the real problem! People are not perfect. Students are people. Therefore, students will not be perfect. Why SHOULDN'T students misbehave at times? I certainly do! I'm a little bit out of control right NOW!*

**Something you expected but didn't get:** *It seems like everything went wrong today! I just wanted to have a nice, easy day with no major problems. Is that so much to ask? Hmmm. I guess it is. Sounds like an unrealistic standard. I keep asking myself, why is this happening to me? Well, why NOT me? What makes me so special that problems only happen to other people? Other people sit in traffic. Other people have difficult workloads. Where is the unwritten rule that says my life should be stress-free all the time? There is no law that says things must go right for me, or that other people will never let me down, or that things will not break or fail to work. I need to stop creating rules for life that require things to go smoothly for me so that I'm not inconvenienced. Tomorrow, I'm not going to base my happiness on whether everyone around me does everything they should. I'm just going to do my best to do my part, and not upset myself by repeating all these "supposed to" beliefs in my head.*

## **Stopping the cycle of comparison and evaluation**

A major part of contentment is being aware of your personal standards and your tendency to evaluate life accordingly. The comparison to standards is part of what causes people in difficult situations to still be happy and people in wonderful situations to be miserable. Dr. Simon calls it your "mood ratio": the comparison between what you perceive your state of affairs to be, and the benchmark or standard you hold for yourself. If you think that your current state compares negatively to your standards, you feel sad.

When you compound that problem with a pessimistic explanatory style, you tell yourself that you're helpless to improve the situation and things will never get better, which sends you into depression. Countering your negative perception of reality (by changing your explanatory style and accurately assessing reality) is part of the battle; the other part is challenging your standards.<sup>44</sup>

Examine your *shoulds* and where you think you ought to be or how you ought to feel.

You can also increase your happiness level and decrease your stress level by practicing mindfulness. Stop comparing and evaluating all the time and just let things be the way they are. Observe and appreciate what is happening without ruminating on your standards and expectations. Refocus your mind on the present and handle any problems as they arise:

*I can enjoy this day without comparing it to other days, or to how I would have preferred the day to go.*

*I can appreciate this class without comparing these students to kids in my other classes.*

*I can accept my vice principal for the person that she is and not compare her to the type of leader I'd prefer her to be.*

*I can do my best with this unit of study and not worry about how well students are learning it when my colleagues teach it in their classes.*

*I can be grateful for the way these events are unfolding, without dwelling on my idea of how things should be happening.*