

## Choose the Empowered Perspective

"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

- Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

- Victor Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning*

"People don't make me angry. How I think makes me angry."

- Marshall B. Rosenberg (founder of Nonviolent Communication)

Clients often ask me what has had the biggest impact on the transformation my life has taken, a shift I describe as moving from 'surviving' to 'thriving'. I tell them that embracing the perspective of "Stimulus – Belief – Response" as a lens to see the world has been the foundation of all the other insights and changes that have taken place. This one idea has made a HUGE difference in how I process everything that is going on around me and how I choose to respond. Even during the times when I react automatically with unhappiness in some form, I can always go back later and look at how I want to feel about it in this moment. With new clients, I always explore their perspective of seeing the world and we discuss the possibilities available. For many of us, we're not even aware that the lens through which we see the world is actually something we choose. It appears as if it is the 'reality' of how the world is. However, there are different ways to look at our experience of the world, and they lead to different outcomes. In this article, I'll review two common perspectives and how they impact our experience. One point of view leads to victimhood and misery, while the other leads to empowerment and freedom. As always, you get to choose!

One way of seeing the world is through a lens called 'Stimulus – Response' (SR). This point of view says there's a **stimulus** – something happening – and as a direct result of that stimulus, we have a **response**. This is the perspective commonly held by most people. Our responses are made up of emotions and actions. For example, if my spouse yells at me (stimulus), I respond by getting angry (emotion) and yelling back (action). Through this lens, the way we feel and what we do is directly caused by the stimulus, i.e. I got angry because my spouse yelled at me. Therefore, we are victims to whatever happens around us. Personally, I don't find this model very appealing because I'd like to have a choice in how I respond to what happens to me. In addition, it doesn't make sense to me based on my experience of the world. If the stimulus directly causes the response, then everyone should have the same response to a given stimulus. Yet, I notice that people often respond differently to the same stimulus. For example, I took a yoga class once where halfway through class the instructor gave lengthy verbal feedback to the group as a whole regarding what she observed about their postures. After the class ended, several of the participants were discussing the effect this had on them in the locker room. One woman felt extremely annoyed and put less strength into her poses after that. Another felt ashamed and tried much harder in her practice. I felt grateful and became more mindful of how I was doing

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the poses rather than staying on autopilot. We all experienced the same stimulus, but had totally different responses!

A second perspective of seeing the world is called 'Stimulus – Belief – Response' (SBR). In this model, there is something in between the stimulus and the response – a **belief**. A belief is simply a thought that we keep thinking. In fact, we have thought it so many times that we “believe” it and now consider it a truth. The belief is the thought we have ABOUT the stimulus. It is basically the lens through which we evaluate the stimulus and decide if it is good or bad for us. In this model, it is actually the belief (not the stimulus) that leads to our response; i.e. how we feel and what we do. I both like and love this model. What I like is that it makes sense to me. It explains why different people have different responses to the same stimulus – because we all have different beliefs. What I love about this point of view is that I am in total control – I no longer have to be a victim of whatever stimulus comes along! If I don't like the response I am having to a given stimulus (e.g. anger, sadness, fear, or any other negative emotion), I can look at the belief that's fueling it and decide to change it to something that would lead to a different response. My beliefs are just thoughts and I'm free to change them any time I want.

You've probably noticed that our culture really embraces the Stimulus – Response point of view. We are constantly blaming others (i.e. the stimulus) for our feelings and actions, and the victim mindset is actively encouraged. It's even evident in our language, “She made me so mad!”, “He made me feel so small.”, or “Of course you feel terrible – who wouldn't in that situation?” If you use Stimulus – Response as a way to see the world, you will always be a victim to the circumstances around you. If you use Stimulus – Belief – Response to see the world, you will always have the power to change responses you don't like. Freedom! You don't have to choose to change your beliefs, but just by having the awareness that you're feeling/acting the way you are because of something you're believing – as opposed to someone or something “doing it to you” – can result in feelings of relief and empowerment. This perspective is available to you at any time, not only when the stimulus is happening. Even if you originally saw the event through the eyes of SR, you can always go back and revisit it again with 'SBR-eyes' and discover your belief(s) in case you want to make a different choice in the future. By noticing what beliefs you hold that are leading to the response you don't like, you have the ability to explore what belief would lead to the response you do want. This is a shortcut to happiness!

However, I'll warn you of one caveat: by using SBR as a perspective to see the world, you give up the right to be a victim to circumstances happening to you, or to play the blame game. You accept responsibility that it's your own thinking that leads to your emotions and actions. This may seem like a no-brainer – giving up victimhood to lead a happier life – but sometimes habits are hard to break. You may be surprised at how often you slip back into blaming others or playing the victim! Particularly when so many others around us who choose to live with a SR mindset encourage it. If you would like to live from an SBR

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perspective and find yourself falling into old habits and playing the victim, be gentle with yourself. Celebrate that you are becoming more aware of what you're doing, and know that it takes practice to learn a new way of thinking! The more you practice, the easier it will get and the happier you will become.

Here's some additional information that might be helpful in understanding the SBR model:

### Stimulus

- A stimulus is anything you put your attention on. If it is happening but you're not aware of it, it is not stimulus for you.
- Stimulus can be external or internal. We are usually more aware of stimuli outside of us (another person, the weather, an event, etc.) but if we pay attention to something internal (a physical sensation, a feeling, a thought, etc.) that is stimulus as well.
  - Examples of stimuli: my boss yelling at me, my ankle hurting, the rain outside my window, and so on.
- The stimulus is neutral; i.e. it is not good or bad, right or wrong. Totally neutral! It's only our beliefs about it that lead to the judgments good/bad/right/wrong.
  - An airplane crashes into a building (neutral stimulus) and some people respond by feeling joy and cheering in the street (based on their belief about the stimulus being good) and some people respond by feeling deep sorrow and crying (based on their belief about the stimulus being bad).

### Beliefs

- Beliefs are also neutral; not good/bad/right/wrong. Different beliefs lead to different responses, and it's useful to choose beliefs that will lead to feelings and actions you desire, but the beliefs themselves are not good or bad – they're just beliefs.
- Beliefs are simply thoughts. Some we've held for a long time and some are newer, but *any* belief can be changed. Beliefs can be discarded and new beliefs can be adopted in an instant, whether we've held those beliefs for a month or 70 years. It just takes a decision.

### Responses

- Responses are always made up of **both** an emotion and an action. Sometimes we are only aware of one of these aspects of a response, but both are always present.
  - Example:
    - (Stimulus) My boss yelled at me.

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- (Belief) I must have done something wrong.
- (Conscious Response) I felt scared.
- (Unconscious Response) My stomach muscles tightened and adrenaline coursed through my body.

As I mentioned above, we can always go back and look at a past event through the lens of SBR to learn more about our beliefs. Developing this skill not only provides us more information about ourselves, but also allows us to create more options for responses. Growing our self-awareness muscle by examining our beliefs is a simple process that gets easier with practice. When you look at the response you're having (or the one you would like to have), it's easy to work backwards and determine what thought would have led to the feeling and action.

Let's look at the example of my yoga class through the lens of SBR. Since I spoke to the ladies about what they thought at the time, I already know what they believed. But by their responses I described above, I bet you can guess their thoughts for yourself.

### Woman #1:

Stimulus: Yoga instructor giving lengthy verbal feedback about the class' postures

**Belief:** She thinks we're lazy, when we're totally busting our butts! I'm not going to kill myself if she can't even notice my effort.

Response: Feeling is extreme annoyance; action is putting less strength into the rest of class

### Woman #2:

Stimulus: Yoga instructor giving lengthy verbal feedback about the class' postures

**Belief:** I'm not trying hard enough.

Response # 2: Feeling is shame; action is putting more effort into the rest of class

### Me:

Stimulus: Yoga instructor giving lengthy verbal feedback about the class' postures

**Belief:** She really cares about our progress and wants us to get the most benefit out of the class.

Response: Feeling is gratitude; action is putting more awareness on my practice

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How can you use the SBR model to change a response to a certain stimulus? It's actually very simple. (Note: I said simple, not easy!) Think of a response you have to a stimulus you'd like to change. For example, when my two children start arguing with each other, I usually feel annoyed and often speak to them in a voice that expresses that frustration. I would really like to feel calm and speak to them in a sweet voice. In fact, I would like to have that response every time this situation comes up! (The reality is that it's fairly rare for me to be totally at peace about this, especially when I'm driving them somewhere in the car and there's no where else to relocate myself.) When I look at the thoughts I'm having about them arguing, I see I have several beliefs about this subject:

*I can't have peace and feel calm if they're yelling at each other.*

*Nice kids aren't mean to each other.*

*They really don't like each other.*

*They're never going to be close as adults.*

*If I were a better parent, they would not talk to each other like that.*

When I step back and look at these thoughts, I immediately see that some of them I don't really believe, although in that moment I bought in to them. For example, I know that all kids argue (even when they like each other), that all kids are sometimes mean (even if predominantly they are nice kids), that sibling rivalry is normal and not a predictor of how close siblings will be as adults, and that even if I was the most amazing parent on the planet my kids could still choose to speak to each other in that way. But the first belief, that I can't have peace if they're yelling, really feels true for me and I realize that I can't both hold this belief and also have the experience I'd like to have with my kids. (At least, not without changing the stimulus, and we all know that we can't control other people!) So what I'd like is for the stimulus to remain the same – the kids are arguing – but my response to be different, so that I feel peaceful and calm and speak to them sweetly. What are some beliefs I could hold that would lead to me feeling peaceful and calm, and then being able to speak to them in a sweet voice? Here are some examples:

*I know I can feel peaceful and calm, even if the kids are arguing. I do it all the time with other people's children, so it's definitely possible for me to hear kids arguing and not be bothered.*

*I really want to model for my children that even when we don't like what's going on around us, we have a choice in how we respond. This is a great opportunity to show them that.*

*It took 5 years of intense work and therapy with my autistic son to make this \*normal\* sibling rivalry possible. I'm so grateful that my son now can speak and is interested in socializing with everyone – including his sister. It is truly a joy to be witnessing this reality that I so desperately longed for!*

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By having these thoughts when the kids are arguing, I set myself up to respond differently – to remain calm and peaceful, and to easily adhere to my intention to speak to them in the way I'd like them to speak to others. The more I practice holding these beliefs, even if it's after I responded in my habitual way, the more I train myself to think these thoughts first and replace the old belief that I need the kids to not argue for me to be calm and peaceful.

In fact, the more I make it a habit to take the time to look for the beliefs that are fueling the responses I have that I don't enjoy, the easier it gets. Each time I do, I reinforce the knowledge that I'm at choice and not the victim of anything. There is no one to blame except myself, since it's my own thinking that's driving me. And there's no need to blame myself, because I have total control to change my beliefs if I want to. If I choose not to, there's no need to judge that as wrong either. There have been many times where I was able to discover the belief that was leading to my unhappiness, but I was not willing to let go of the idea responsible. That's ok! Just knowing that I was deciding to hold onto this thought, for whatever my reasons, is useful in understanding myself. The more self-awareness I have, the more choices I have to make changes in the future.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this article, adopting the SBR perspective to see the world has had the biggest impact on my life. No matter what comes my way, I know that I have the ability to think about it in a way that supports my happiness, peace, and comfort. I don't always choose it (particularly when I'm right in the middle of the stimulus), but I always come back to my center of knowing I'm free and empowered to create what I want in my life. It's becoming easier and easier to do this in the moment, and my life is getting better and better! I invite you to explore using SBR in your own life. Just remember, like anything new it will take some practice, so be gentle. ☺

### Acknowledgments

I was introduced to the SBR model at The Option Institute (Sheffield, MA), an exceptional learning facility where I have had the pleasure of completing many training courses. However, many others have shared and continue to teach this idea, and it has been around in various forms for centuries. The founders of the Option Institute, Bears and Samaria Kaufmann, developed and expanded their understanding of the importance of beliefs on emotions based on the Option Method developed by Bruce Di Marsico, whom they studied with in the 1970's. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), developed in the 1960's and popularized in 80's and 90's, is also based in SBR principles, as are many other philosophies and modalities.