

Catch ANTs of 'Generalisation'!

Jane* was a Primary Five student. Her relationship with her Chinese Language (CL) teacher was inexplicably strained. Her teacher's attempts to turn the situation around did not help. When queried, the student agreed that her teacher was kind and could not explain the 'animosity' she felt towards her. She agreed to see a counsellor.

Exploration into her history with Chinese Language teachers threw up interesting patterns. At Primary Two, Jane had a CL teacher who was very harsh. The outspoken girl received the brunt of her harshness. She did not take to subsequent CL teachers well, but relationships had not been as strained as with the current one.

Further probe revealed that her Primary Two CL teacher and her current teacher had common physical traits. Both were of about the same build, age and both wore glasses.

Jane had, without being aware, formed an irrational discrimination towards all CL teachers. She had written them off even before she had reasons to dislike them. The intensity of the discrimination was especially strong towards her Primary Five CL teacher for obvious reasons. Although obvious to a third party, this happened without conscious intention.

What has been at work is an unhelpful thinking habit- the habit of 'Generalisation' reinforced by an intricate network of detrimental psychological mechanisms.

How did this thinking habit come about?



Our natural pattern of learning is to move from the general to the specific. For example, we learn about 'doctors' before we know about 'paediatricians', 'orthopaedics', 'cardiologists', etc. Generalising becomes something we are accustomed to. In fact too much so for our own good when it comes to making accurate judgements about self and others.

In our need to make sense of our experiences, we are also always on a look-out for common denominators among things, people and events, to sort them into broad categories and general patterns.

Hence if CL teacher A is harsh and CL teacher B is stern, we easily generalize and conclude that all CL teachers fall into the broad category of 'unapproachable and unfriendly people'. Quite often, a subconscious decision follows from this conclusion- 'I will keep a distance from and guard against all CL teachers'.

What makes it more damaging is that this thinking pattern does not operate alone but is reinforced by other thought mechanisms, such as black and white thinking pattern (teachers are perceived as either approachable or unapproachable), mental filtering (any experience that

does not agree with the tentative belief that all CL teachers are unapproachable are likely filtered out) and emotional reasoning (the assessment of whether the teacher is approachable or not is made subjectively based on how I feel), etc. The interplay of this network of mechanisms causes a tentative thought/belief to become strengthened and entrenched over time.

Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs) of Generalisation, the by-product of this thinking habit, are then formed. They are characterized by general terms 'all', 'always', 'never', 'everybody', etc. (eg. 'All CL teachers are unapproachable.' 'Never trust a wealthy person.' 'Female bosses are *always* controlling.')

ANTs of Generalisation cause us to harbour preconceived judgments about things, people and events. We have decided even before we know the truth. We become prejudiced, be it towards races, gender, people of certain occupations or economic strata etc.

When we have an ingrained thinking habit of 'Generalisation', we not only form prejudices against others, we become prejudiced against ourselves too. ANTs such as 'I am *always* picked on', 'I can *never* do anything well' or 'I don't belong *anywhere*' creep up on us when our mind picks up subconsciously that the experience we are going through falls under something we have previously made generalization of.

People with 'self-prejudices' are prone to making sweeping evaluations about themselves which are inaccurate, untrue and unfair, driving them into self-defeating behaviour and relationship issues.

*fictitious name

Connect-Point

"I am not what happens to me. I choose who I become." ~Carl Jung

No discussion on ANTs can overemphasize the point that although ANTs show up without our consciously creating them, they are capable of driving our emotions and actions. A thought invariably evokes a feeling. The feeling dictates what we choose to do or not do. An ANT of Generalisation such as 'I can never get anything right' will inevitably lead to discouragement, resulting in avoidance or resistance to take on new challenges. When we choose this course of action, we further strengthen the ANT 'I can never get anything right.' The vicious cycle goes on.



What can we do to break out of this vicious cycle? Catch, Check and Change is the suggested strategy. It is a new way of operating mentally. We engage with the ANTs in a new way. We stop them in their tracks, identify them, subject them to strict scrutiny, confront and challenge them. In the past, we did their bidding. With this strategy, we become their master.

Since ANTs show up unannounced, catching them always involves backtracking. Pause and ask "What thought came to me before that happened?" When we can retrace and identify the thought and better yet, the belief that triggered our unhelpful emotions or that which led us to taking a course of action that proved to be unhelpful, we would have the culprit, the ANTs, in captivity.

Checking ANTs always involves subjecting the caught ANTs to close scrutiny by asking pertinent questions. "How are these ANTs affecting me?" "Is this thought helping me?" "Is this thought accurate?" "What is the belief behind this thought?" "What is the irrational thinking pattern behind this thought/ belief?" "Is it a thinking pattern of generalization?"

If indeed they are ANTs of generalization, changing them offers the way out of our vicious cycles. Changing ANTs is about confronting and updating them. When ANTs of generalization 'I am always picked on,' 'I can never do anything well' or 'I don't belong anywhere,' etc., appear, recognise that they are just thoughts. A thought is not a fact. A belief is not a truth. The source of these thoughts and beliefs is unreliable. Recognise that they need to be corrected.

Acknowledge the need to correct the ANTs by updating them. Do this by confronting and engaging them. "Is it true that I am picked on *all* the time?" "What I said about being picked on may be true of that time under that teacher. It does not mean it is true of other times or will be true in future." "If it is true that I am always picked on, is there something about me that I should look at and change?"

Consciously look for 'counter examples' to challenge the unhelpful ANT. For example, for the ANT 'I can *never* do anything well,' record things that one does right to re-educate the mind. The mind is a neutral ground. Whatever we think, we become.

What happened to the case of the Primary Five student? With help, Jane discovered the source of her irrational discrimination. She confronted her irrational belief and accepted that while it is true that some CL teachers are harsh and unapproachable, not all CL teachers are so. She made a renewed decision to relate to her teacher differently. With that, the irrational discrimination lost its grip over her. Jane became free to choose a new course of action, free to relate in a new light.

Knowing and embracing the truth sets us free. You can enjoy this freedom too. It does not come free though. It is said that 'Nothing worth having comes easy.' So it is with overcoming ANTs and their negative consequences. It requires intentionality and conscious effort.

Contact Us

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