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# **Depression Proof Yourself— *And Your Kids!***

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***A guide to overcoming adversity,  
building resilience and  
creating what matters***

**Bruce Elkin, Prevention Education Specialist**

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## **DEPRESSION PROOF YOUR SELF— AND YOUR KIDS!**

*“Almost one-third of contemporary thirteen year olds have marked depressive symptoms, and by the time they finish high school almost 15 percent have had an episode of major depression.”*

*- Martin Seligman, Ph. D., **The Optimistic Child***

The number of adults and children suffering from depression is rising sharply. According to recent polls by Gallup, *USA Today*, and Pew, 71 percent of Americans are depressed, 49 percent can't focus on work or other daily activities, a third aren't sleeping well, and 57 percent are worried about the future. However, even before the events of September 11th, 2001 experts reported dramatic increases in depression.

“We are in the middle of an epidemic of depression,” states Dr. Martin Seligman, past-president of the American Psychological Society, “and one with consequences that, through suicide, takes as many lives as the AIDS epidemic and is more widespread.”

The worst part of the staggering rise in depression is its effects on our kids. In Canada, a national newspaper headline announced that 27 percent of teen girls “fall prey to disordered eating” and face increased risks of depression and suicide. The same week, radio news described an increase in teen alcohol and other drug use. A TV special laid bare the agony of three mothers whose teens took their own lives this year. Suicide, reported another special on teen depression, is now the number two cause of death among Canadian teens.

When I asked local kids about all these reports, they shrugged their shoulders. One kid mumbled, “Shit happens! A lot of kids are way bummed by stuff these days.” Then they turned away.

What's going on? Why is this happening?

Most important, what can we do about it?

### **What's Going On?**

Seligman, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania whose theory of “Learned Helplessness” was deemed “the landmark theory of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” by the American Psychological Association, says that the rate of depression in teens has ballooned to over 10 times what it was in the 1950s. Teen suicide has tripled since 1960. Worse, the rate continues to grow as depression effects kids earlier in their lives than ever before. “Our children,” says Seligman in his book, *The Optimistic Child*, “are experiencing pessimism, sadness, and passivity at an unprecedented rate.”

### **Why Is This Happening?**

These are challenging times. It is tough being a kid. Or a parent. In general, two key things threaten our kids and us. First, the amount of adversity we face is increasing. Second, we tend to take a more pessimistic stance toward that adversity.

### **Adversity is Increasing**

The economic landscape is shifting under our feet. The environment is deteriorating. The future of work is uncertain. Many of us are becoming more cynical and losing faith in our leaders and institutions. The importance and support of community has diminished. The focus on the self has grown. As our society becomes more mobile, it also becomes more fragmented. More of us find that we don't matter to anyone, that we don't have a purpose worth pursuing, and that meaning is harder to come by. This all leads to an increase in depression.

Kids have it just as hard, or worse. At home they face busy, stressed-out parents, questionably safe neighborhoods, and often the boring, sterility of a suburban existence. At school they face cutbacks, large classes, bullying, violence, widespread alcohol and other drug use, unbridled sexuality, and all too often, a hamstrung, unresponsive institutional approach to their individual needs. Much of what they

learn comes from TV and from advertising that preys upon their deepest insecurities and basest fears.

“Adversity is on the rise,” says Dr. Paul Stoltz, author of *Adversity Quotient: Turning Obstacles Into Opportunities*, “and it strikes earlier and more unremittingly than ever.”\* However, Stoltz, Seligman, and other experts agree that it’s not just adversity that leads to depression; it’s what we *do* with adversity.

### **Pessimism is Increasing**

Unfortunately, many of us, especially teens, take a pessimistic stance toward what happens. They dwell on the worst aspects of any setback, thinking, for example, that the adversity is *permanent* (“This is gonna last *forever!*”). They think it is *pervasive* (“It’s gonna ruin my *whole* life!”). They think it is *personal*. (“This is all *my* fault!”).

When anyone, particularly teenagers, reacts to adversity with a sense that it’s permanent, pervasive, and personal, it leads to pessimism. And this kind of pessimism leads almost inevitably to giving up.

Please don’t think that pessimism is just a passing fad, a phase through which all kids pass. It’s not. Pessimism can quickly become an entrenched habit of thinking that breeds a sense of helplessness (“I can’t do *anything* about this”). It leads to depressed moods, apathy, lack of achievement, and poor health. As with adults, alcohol and other drug use becomes self-medicating behavior. Left unchecked, helplessness can spiral down into hopelessness (“What’s the point of doing *anything* about *anything?*”). Lack of hope is the prime cause of suicide among teens.

That’s the bad news. There is also good news. Experts say we can “immunize” ourselves and our kids against depression. However,

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\* Paul Stoltz, *Adversity Quotient: Turning Obstacles Into Opportunities*, John Wiley and Sons, New York (1997)

before we examine ways to safeguard ourselves and our kids, let's first look at how you can tell if a child (or any person) is depressed.

### **HOW TO TELL IF YOUR CHILD IS DEPRESSED**

The first questions people I work with ask are, "How can I tell if my child is depressed?" "How can I tell if a kid in my class or on my team is depressed? What's the difference between depression and a case of 'the blues?' Or between depression and a bad attitude?"

We'll answer these questions in the next section. Then, in the remainder of this booklet, we'll focus on, "What can we do about it?" By the end of the booklet you will be aware of new ways to overcome adversity, build resilience in yourself and your kids, and create what matters. You'll be able to depression proof yourself and your kids.

### **When "the Blues" Last For Weeks**

Imagine that Johnny's been acting down lately. He seems sad and listless. He's easily irritated. Uninterested in his regular activities, he drags himself around the house complaining that he's "bored." He bursts into tears at the slightest thing. His mom worries that he's depressed. His dad disagrees. "He's just got a case of the blues. It'll blow over." He tells Johnny to "pull himself together."

Is Johnny depressed? Or is he just temporarily out of sorts?

This is *not* a trivial question. As depression approaches "epidemic" proportions, suicide, often related to depression, has become the number two killer of teens in Canada. Moreover, depression strikes earlier in life than ever before. You don't want to ignore this question, or be wrong about the answer.

So, how do you know if your child is depressed?

There are three types of depression. Major depression (sometimes know as clinical depression or unipolar disorder), chronic low-level depression, and manic-depression (bipolar disorder). The symptoms of *major depression* are much the same in children as they are in adults. These are the signs to look for:

- Sadness, anxiety, or “empty” feelings;
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being “slowed down;”
- Loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities;
- Sleep disturbances (insomnia, oversleeping, or waking much earlier than usual);
- Appetite or weight changes (loss or gain);
- Difficulty concentrating, making decisions, remembering;
- Irritability or excessive crying;
- Feelings of hopelessness, guilt, and worthlessness;
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts;
- Chronic aches and pains not explained by another physical condition.

It is normal for all of us to be down from time to time and most kids will show some of these signs some of the time. You don't want to over-react. **However, if your child shows five or more of these symptoms of major depression and they last for two or more weeks you should get help from a mental health professional.** And regardless of whether they show these signs, **if your child talks about or tries to commit suicide, you must get help immediately.**

A less intense version of depression (*dysthymia*) involves long-term but less severe symptoms that can nevertheless keep your child from functioning fully or feeling well. **If your child's depressed mood lasts for a year or more and he or she shows at least two other symptoms of major depression, you should seek professional help.** Low-level, chronic depression, if left unchecked, can put you or your child at risk of major depression later in life.

A third form, *bipolar disorder (or manic-depression)*, manifests as cycles of depression alternating with cycles of elation and increased (manic) activity. Symptoms include severe changes in mood; over-inflated self-esteem; increased energy; decreased need for sleep; talking too fast and changing topics too quickly; easily distracted, attention constantly moving from one thing to another; increased sexual

thoughts, feelings, behaviors, or use of explicit sexual language; and excessive involvement in risky behaviors or activities.

A child who appears to be depressed and shows signs of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), especially if there are excessive temper outbursts and mood changes, should be seen by a psychologist or psychiatrist experienced in treating bipolar disorder. This is especially true if there is a family history of the illness.

Unfortunately, it's not always easy to recognize symptoms in younger children. Children can't always explain how they feel, and they express symptoms differently at different ages. Instead of telling you that they feel "worthless" or "hopeless," they may act out or be irritable. Other signs to be on the lookout for are:

- A drop in school attendance or grades;
- Talk of running away from home;
- Alcohol or other drug use/abuse;
- Difficulty with relationships;
- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure;
- Outbursts of shouting, complaining, unexplained irritability, or crying.

Depression is much more common in teens than in children. Moreover, younger children, says Dr. Seligman, "do not become hopeless." They rarely commit suicide. Early-onset depression and chronic low-level depression, however, are serious and can put a child at risk for major depression later in life.

If you suspect children are suffering from depression, try talking with them. Listen carefully and respectfully; stay aware of their feelings. Don't try to "fix" what's bothering them. Don't tell them what they "should" do. Just listen. Give them your full attention. Sometimes just being there for them can make a dramatic difference.

*If you have any doubt, seek professional help.* Talk to your doctor or to the school counsellor. Contact your community health services office or the local Mental Health office. Don't worry about what caused the



depression. The key is to get help for your child sooner rather than later. Depression can be successfully treated.

While anti-depressant drugs are often used to treat depression, research done by the National Institute of Mental Health in the US shows that one of the most effective treatments for depression is cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). A time-limited therapy, CBT helps depression sufferers identify and change distorted views of themselves and their future. CBT seems to work better than most types of “talking therapies.” The CBT principles of “explanatory style” also underlie the most effective forms of prevention that we’ll look at next.

### **SAFEGUARDING KIDS FROM DEPRESSION**

The good news is that depression isn’t caused by adversity. Our responses to adversity cause depression. Martin Seligman and Paul Stoltz have shown that changing *our own* responses to adversity is the first step in “immunizing” both our selves and our kids against pessimism and depression. Furthermore, the antidote to depression for us all, says Seligman, is twofold. Develop “masterful action” and flexible, optimistic “explanatory styles.”

#### **Encouraging Masterful Action**

Masterful action is the habit of persisting in the face of challenge and overcoming obstacles. It can begin in the crib and be reinforced throughout childhood. We’ll see how to develop it ourselves in the section on Adversity Quotient to follow. For now, let’s focus on kids.

“Masterful action,” says Dr. Seligman, “is the crucible in which pre-school optimism is forged.” Helping children learn from their own experiences is critical. For example, when little Kip or Serena struggle as they try to climb up on the couch, let them figure out their own ways to do it. Don’t interfere, except for safety reasons. “For your child to experience mastery,” says Seligman, “it is necessary for him to fail, to feel bad, and to try again repeatedly until success occurs.”

Intervening unnecessarily can hinder development. My father, for example, used to tell me, “If you can’t do something right, don’t do it!” Then he’d snatch the tools away and finish whatever project I was working on. I was left feeling stupid and inept. On the other hand, when I couldn’t finish my school solar system project on time (because I was afraid I wouldn’t “do it right”), my mother paper machéed the planets for me. Both thought they were helping me.

However, 50 years later, I still have trouble working with my hands. I have almost no confidence in my ability to make or fix things. I feel stupid and inept around people who are good with their hands. Part of my self-esteem and confidence—my “can-do” attitude—was hindered by these early failures to develop masterful action.

My parents, the experts say, would have done better to let me fail, feel bad, learn from my mistakes, and try again until I achieved mastery. That way they would have helped me develop the authentic form of self-esteem that comes from doing well at something difficult. None of the steps can be circumvented. “Failure and feeling bad,” says Seligman, “are necessary building blocks for ultimate success and feeling good.”

“Self-esteem” was originally defined as “feeling good about doing well.” But, as Seligman and others point out, most self-esteem programs focus more on feeling good than they do on doing well.

In fact, Seligman goes so far as to say, “The one element most responsible for the epidemic is the *cushioning of dysphoria*.” By that he means that many parents and teachers have attempted to cushion children from strong, negative feelings—anger, sadness, and anxiety.

Such emotions exist for a reason. They spur us to take action, to change ourselves or our world, and end the bad feelings.

Kids who are cushioned from feeling bad about difficult situations or events do not learn how to deal with strong feelings when they are young. As teenagers, they are not equipped to deal with the much higher levels of personal and interpersonal adversity they experience. They are then at a much higher risk for depression.

This might be why, despite the fact that young boys are much more likely to be depressed than young girls, the ratio shifts after puberty and girls become twice as likely to be depressed as boys. This ratio holds throughout adulthood as well. So don't feel bad if your child fails at something and feels bad herself. Encourage her to keep trying until she gets it right. Then both of you will feel good about doing well.

### **Changing Explanatory Style**

As we grow from toddlers to children to teens and finally into adulthood, we develop theories about why we succeed and why we fail. Earlier we saw that how we explain adversity, setbacks, and failure to ourselves largely determines how they affect us. If we describe the adversity pessimistically (as permanent, pervasive, and personal), we are likely to feel helpless and depressed. Because kids pick up their explanatory style largely from their parents, changing the way you explain things can help both you and your child take an optimistic yet realistic approach towards what happens. Realistic optimists rarely suffer from depression.

Instead of perceiving adversity pessimistically, Seligman has shown that optimists see it as *temporary* ("This won't last"), *specific* ("Just *part* of my life is affected"), and *external* ("It's *not* all my fault"). Realistic optimists realize they always have some *control* over adversity and its outcomes—if only over their own responses. They also know how to limit adversity's *reach* into their lives. Moreover, they know that the adversity will not *endure* forever.

Paul Stoltz added a fourth element: *ownership*. His research shows that a willingness to own the outcomes of adversity—to be accountable for the results you want regardless of what happens or who is at fault—helps you persevere. Kids (and adults) who score high on control and ownership persist where others quit. They feel empowered where others feel helpless. They succeed where others fail.

Changing *your* response to adversity helps you become more successful and to feel better about yourself and your life. It also steers your kids away from the vicious spiral of pessimism, helplessness, and hopelessness. It helps them become resilient, optimistic, and creative in the face of challenging circumstances. These are the true basics, the critical life skills that kids need in challenging times.

### **HELPING KIDS HELP THEMSELVES**

So what can a parent (or a teacher, coach, or any concerned adult) do to help kids build a sense of realistic optimism and a capacity for masterful action?

First, do it yourself!

Practice what you preach. Today's media-savvy kids can spot the "do-what-I-say-not-what-I-do" lecture from miles away. Many adults suffer from some sort of depression and more have depressive tendencies. So take a long, hard look at your own way of dealing with life's difficulties and setbacks. Note particularly how you describe what happens to you and what you say about adversity when it strikes.

"When I first started paying attention to how I described the adverse events that happened to me" said Elizabeth, one of my coaching clients, "I was shocked. I discovered that I'd react to difficult situations by saying things like, 'I can't handle this,' or 'This is too much for me.' I'd think bad situations were all my fault, especially if others were involved. And, one of my worst reactions was saying things like, 'This always happens to me' or 'I'll never get this right.'"

Note the permanent, personal, and pervasive nature of Elizabeth's statements. Becoming aware of her pessimistic explanatory style not only helped Elizabeth shift from a pessimistic stance toward the world to a more optimistic one, it also helped her daughter.

"I noticed that Jessie followed my lead," she told me. "If I explained things pessimistically, she was more likely to do the same. When I learned to give more realistic and optimistic explanations for things that happened to me, so did Jessie."

Changing explanatory style requires awareness and practice. However, it can be as easy as adding one word to a sentence. Consider the difference it makes if we add “yet” to “I can’t do this.” Imagine something you cannot do, say, “I can’t do it,” and note how you feel. Then imagine it again, say, “I can’t do it yet,” and note how you feel.

The first statement implies that your inability to do the thing is permanent. The second implies that it’s temporary. Did you note a difference in how you felt as you shifted from one sentence to the other? It’s amazing what the addition of the word “yet” to such a statement can make. That’s the power of explanatory style.

Being aware of your explanatory style is particularly key for mothers because research shows that mothers’ explanatory styles are closely correlated with their children’s explanatory styles. Moms with pessimistic explanatory styles (what Stoltz calls low AQ responses) tend to pass them on to their kids.

But don’t panic. Parents are not the only ones responsible for children’s ways of explaining what happens to them. Kids also pick up elements of their explanatory styles from teachers, coaches, peers, and the culture at large. You are not solely responsible for your child’s style. Please don’t blame yourself. It’s what you do from here on out that is important, not what you might have done in the past. You too can learn the basics of masterful action and reality-based optimism.

“Just knowing where my depressive tendencies lay,” another of my clients confided, “helped me overcome them.”

## **MASTERING ADVERSITY**

At this point, I recommend that you think about the future you want and your children’s future. Would you like to be optimistic? Would you like to deal with adversity with grace and ease? Would you like to be resilient, able to bounce back from setbacks quickly? Would you like to be able to create what truly matters to you?

If the answer to these questions is “Yes!” ask yourself if you’re willing to learn new ways to explain what happens to you, and new

ways to work with your kids around what happens to them. Do that now, before continuing. If this is what you want, choose it by saying to yourself, “I choose...” and fill in the blank with what you want.

Once you’ve decided that you want to change the way you respond to adversity, you need to assess where you’re starting from. You can start by assessing your levels of optimism and pessimism. Seligman includes simple instruments for assessing both in his book *Learned Optimism*. Local mental health associations will provide you with depression screening tools. Or, access the US National Mental Health’s depression screening service at <http://www.depression-screening.org/>

One of the best tools for evaluating and changing explanatory style, and the one I most often use with my clients and workshop participants, is Paul Stoltz’s *Adversity Response Profile (ARP)*.\*

### **What’s Your AQ?**

AQ stands for Adversity Quotient. Just as IQ measures your intelligence quotient, AQ measures your capacity to deal with adversity. The Adversity Response Profile (ARP) is a scientifically validated, yet easy-to-use instrument that measures your overall AQ and your performance levels on key success factors. It measures:

- How well you deal with adversity;
- How capable you are of surmounting it;
- How well you do on factors leading to mastery and optimism;
- Who overcomes adversity and prevails, who gives in and quits;
- Who will exceed expectations and who will fall short.

Awareness can be curative.

“When I took the ARP and saw that I scored very low on ownership,” Jill, a single mother of two told me, “I immediately began to notice how I played a victim role in difficult situations. And I saw

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\* The Adversity Response Profile is usually taken in a workshop or a coaching session. However, you can access it via the Internet. Contact the author at [belkin@saltspring.com](mailto:belkin@saltspring.com) for details.

the same 'poor me' behavior in my kids. Seeing that I was responding this way, I found it easier to take more ownership for what I wanted. That helped me take action that supports what matters to me."

### **The Four CORE AQ Skills**

Stoltz's AQ approach draws on the work of Seligman and other cognitive psychologists as well as recent findings in neurophysiology and psychoimmunology. "When we fail at something," says Seligman, "we all become helpless and depressed *at least momentarily*. We don't initiate voluntary actions as quickly as we would otherwise, or we may not try at all. If we do try, we will not persist."

Explanatory style makes the difference between a pessimistic reaction and optimistic action. "Optimists," says Seligman, "recover from their momentary helplessness immediately. ... [T]hey pick themselves up, shrug and start trying again. For them, defeat is a challenge, a mere setback on the road to inevitable victory."

Building on Seligman's findings, Paul Stoltz identified four "CORE skills" that determine whether you will, as he puts it, *quit*, *camp*, or keep *climbing* the mountains of your life, the challenges you face and choose. Using the ARP, you can see how well you do on each of these key factors.

The first factor, *Control*, assesses your perceived level of control over adverse effects and their consequences. The higher your sense of control, the more likely you are to deal effectively with adversity. The less control you think you have, the less likely you are to act. A pessimist might say, "There's nothing I can do about this." However, no matter what the adversity, a person with a high sense of control will think, "There must be something I can do about this difficulty."

At the very least, high AQ optimists realize that they can always control their own response—their attitude—toward adversity. Because they perceive that they have some control over adverse events, those with higher AQ's take more action, which results in more control. They're less likely to be sidetracked by adversity or quit.

*Ownership* refers to the degree to which you own the outcomes of adversity and hold yourself accountable for achieving what you want. High ownership reflects an ability to take responsibility, learn from adversity, and focus on results. Low scores reflect a lack of motivation that leads to blaming, decreased energy, and low self-esteem.

The research on ownership shows that men, in general, tend to blame others for what happens to them, while women tend to take on too much ownership, to take all of the blame onto themselves. Neither approach is effective. Asking, “What do I want out of this situation?” not “Who’s to blame?” is a sign of ownership.

There’s a reinforcing relationship between *ownership* and *control*. Taking ownership leads you to take action in support of what matters to you. That gives you a greater sense of self-control. A stronger sense of control makes it easier to take ownership. Success grows upon success.

*Reach* describes the extent to which you let adversity reach into other areas of your life. Scoring high on reach indicates that you keep adversity in its place. Not letting work problems bleed over into family life or relationships is an example of limiting reach. People who score low in this area tend to let adversity overwhelm all aspects of their lives. Limiting the reach of adversity into your life is a key factor in preventing the downward spiral toward helplessness.

Finally, *Endurance* refers to how long you think events and their consequences will last. Optimistic, high AQ people see adversity as a short term, passing phenomena. “This too,” they say, “will pass.” Pessimistic, low scorers see adversity as long lasting. “This,” they moan, “will never end.” Such a stance can lead to a serious lack of hope.

These four skills—control, ownership, reach, and endurance—underlie your and your child’s habitual ways of reacting to adversity. By assessing them, you can better see where work and change will produce desired results. However, it’s one thing to assess AQ, to see how your unique pattern of control, ownership, reach, and



endurance plays out, it's another to improve your responses in each area, and still another to put your new-found knowledge into practice.

"I found the CORE skills easier to grasp once I practiced them," a lawyer and father told me. "Through practice I came to understand them better and to see how they applied to me specifically. They've turned out to be a very simple yet powerful way to guide myself and my kids toward a more optimistic stance. I'm teaching them to my partners."

### **The ABC's of Optimism**

Stoltz's and Seligman's methods for changing explanatory style are based on a technique pioneered by Albert Ellis, author of *A New Guide to Rational Living*. Ellis, who was one of the founders of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, says that changing how you feel by changing how you think is as simple as ABC.

In his model, *A* stands for *Adversity*, *B* stands for *Beliefs*, and *C* stands for *Consequences*. When something unpleasant happens to us (*A*), we don't automatically act or react. We think about it first. Usually unconsciously and often in a split second, we compare what happened to us to our beliefs about how the world is and should be (*B*). What we believe and think about what happened can have a dramatic effect on what we feel and do (*C*).

If, after comparing reality to our beliefs (again this happens so fast that we're rarely aware that we're even doing it) the fit is fine (things, other people, the world, and ourselves are as we think they should be) we produce good feelings. Positive consequences prevail.

If, however, there is a discrepancy between what happens and what we think *should* have happened, we generate fear, anger, guilt and other bad feelings. Negative consequences prevail.

The action we take when faced with negative feelings is quite different than the action we take when we produce good feelings. Usually it focuses on getting rid of the bad feelings, or at least getting temporary relief. The results we want are forgotten, and often the

action we take is reactive and leads to even worse problems and worse feelings.

Say, for example, that you are attempting to eat a more healthy diet, one that doesn't include much saturated fat or sugar. Then one night you invite a friend over to watch a video and she brings a large carton of your favorite double chocolate, espresso bean, extra-creamy coffee liqueur ice cream. During the movie, you eat only a small helping of ice cream but you feel guilty about doing even that. Later, when your friend leaves, you think to yourself, "Darn! I really screwed up. I know I shouldn't eat ice cream. Eating a little makes me want a lot more. I'm such a wimp. I have no willpower whatsoever. I'll never live up to these food choices I've made. It's hopeless. I might as well quit now and eat the whole darn carton." And you do, which "just proves" you say to yourself, "that I *am* a spineless wimp with no willpower heading straight toward a future as a beachball!"

But would you be right?

Would you be justified in jumping to this conclusion? Does eating one dish of ice cream really mean you're a wimp, that you have no willpower? Does it have to create such guilt? Does it have to result in a downwardly spiraling viscous circle?

No! To jump from a dish of ice cream to such judgements about yourself and your future is irrational. It's based on pessimistic beliefs about what you "should" and worse, what you "always" should do to live up to your food choices (and other tough choices you try to make.)

A rational, optimistic approach to this situation would be to see it as a bump on the road to healthy eating, a momentary setback. Say to yourself, "See, I *can* eat a small amount of ice cream and leave it at that. I don't have to be perfect. And I don't have to feel guilty about minor deviations from my plan. I *do* have the will to support my food choices."

Thinking like this, you are far less likely to eat the rest of the carton.

Thinking like this also reverses the viscous circle. It turns it into an upward spiral of learning and capacity building. You did well and you

feel good about doing so. That adds to your sense of control, making it easier to deal with the next challenging situation or setback you face. Competence and confidence both increase.

Looking at your thinking using Ellis's *ABC* approach you can see that *A*, the guilt and self-doubt you felt as a result of eating a small dish of ice cream was a form of *adversity*. Turning to *B*, you can see that your harsh judgments about yourself came from the irrational *beliefs* that you "screwed up," that you *are* a "wimp," and that you have "no willpower." Moreover, you'll see that these judgments came from deeper beliefs (probably unconscious) that you *should never* make a mistake and that, if you do, you are a bad person (*a wimp*) who *can't ever* live up to the choices you make. This kind of permanent (*can't, never, ever*), pervasive (*always*), and personal (*I, me*) way of thinking generates the pessimistic judgments which lead to *C*, (*consequences*), i.e. bad feelings and inappropriate actions. Eating the rest of the ice cream, for example, is a way to get temporary relief from those bad feelings. However, it actually compounds them, making you feel even worse about yourself. Down you spiral toward helplessness and hopelessness.

Understanding the *ABC's* of optimism means that next time something like this happens, you're prepared. You eat only a small dish and congratulate yourself for being so strong and focused on living up to your food choices. You make sure your friend takes the half-full carton of ice cream home with her, even though she says she doesn't think she can deal with it. Sorry, you say. I've had my limit. You brought it, you take it home. Again, you congratulate yourself for being strong in the face of adversity. You feel good about the actions you take in general, and you think that your future looks positive and promising.

### **Disputing Beliefs, Generating Energy**

Understanding the *ABC's* means understanding the connections between adversity, beliefs, and consequences. It also means understanding the *D* and *E* stages. To change negative consequences (bad feelings and self-defeating actions) into positive consequences

(good feelings and self-empowering actions) you need to uncover and change the inappropriate beliefs. You need to dispute their validity, then take action on the new beliefs you uncover. Ellis calls those two steps *D*, for *Disputation* of the irrational beliefs, and *E*, for the *Energization* that comes from changing your feelings and actions.

Each time something adverse happens to you or you notice yourself feeling bad, stop for a second or two. It's important to recognize adversity and bad feelings when they strike. Paul Stoltz throws his hands up in the air and shouts, "AWOOGA! AWOOGA" every time he's aware of adversity. Others snap rubber bands on their wrists each time they notice themselves feeling bad or ruminating on adversity. I prefer the more sedate, "Ah, so!" that my neighbor's six year old daughter taught me after I'd dropped a jar of soya milk on the floor. Whatever you choose to do, the point is to interrupt your thinking/feeling pattern and notice the adversity and your response to it.

Think about what you're thinking. Notice what you're saying to yourself. Is what you're saying true? Do you really believe it? Or are you unconsciously reacting to what happens by filtering your thoughts through negative, even irrational beliefs and generating depressing consequences for yourself?

If you find that you are, try to surface, dispute, and change the negative beliefs. Be on the lookout for trigger words like "can't," "never," "ever," "every," or "totally," "absolutely," "everything," "all." Using these words causes you to "catastrophize" situations, to exaggerate the permanence and pervasiveness of them.

Look also for demands, ideals that you impose upon yourself. They'll be couched in terms like "should," "ought," "must," and "have to." Be careful not to "should on yourself," Albert Ellis counseled. Using demanding, absolutistic words distorts your impressions and interpretations of reality. That makes it hard to create what you want.

Replace these trigger words with more appropriate words. You can soften the absolute words like "always" by putting "almost" in

front of them. This almost always works. Better still, be as accurate as you can. Instead of saying to your spouse, “You never take out the garbage!” say something like, “I’ve noticed that you took out the garbage twice in the last six months.” Being objective takes the emotional charge out of your words. It turns an accusation into an observation and lets the other person (hopefully) draw his or her own conclusions.

Replace irrational beliefs (such as “Everyone *should always* love me”) with more appropriate beliefs (such as “I’d *prefer* if everyone loved me, but that’s not likely to happen. So there’s no point getting upset if some people don’t love like I think they should”).

Once you’ve changed what you say about an adverse situation, you’ll usually find that you have much greater energy. That will enable you to take the appropriate action you think best serves the results you want to create in that situation—and in your life.

It’s as simple as ABC...DE, but it does take practice to get good at it.

### **CREATING WHAT *TRULY* MATTERS**

Mastering Stoltz’s CORE skills and Ellis’s ABC’s is a great way to develop the capacity to deal with unforeseen adversity. In my workshops, I also teach people to anticipate and avoid adversity by wrapping the CORE and ABC skills into Robert Fritz’s framework for clarifying and creating what truly matters to you.

Fritz, with whom I trained and worked for nine years, is the author of numerous books on applying the creative process in everyday life including the *Path of Least Resistance*, *Creating*, and *The Path of Least Resistance for Managers*. He says that *creating*—i.e., bringing into being what you most want—is a far more empowering, energizing, and effective stance than merely reacting to and solving problems—i.e., getting rid of (or relief from) what you don’t want.

## Shifting Your Stance

Close your eyes and think about the three worst problems you currently face. Focus on those problems for a few moments. See each one of them in great detail. Then note how you feel.

Now, focus on three things you would *love* to have in your life, but which don't yet exist. Don't worry whether they're possible or not. For now, imagine that they *do* exist in your life. Focus on those creations, fully created. See them in detail. Then note how you feel.

People in my workshops inevitably feel down and depressed, even helpless, when they focus on problems. But when they shift their focus to creating, they feel energized, excited, and ready to take action. Shifting from a reactive/responsive, problem-focused stance to a vision-driven creating stance gives them a greater sense of control and ownership. It can bring about the same changes in you and your kids.

When faced with a problem, the way to shift stances is to ask yourself, "What's the opposite of this problem? *What do I really want?*"

Let's say the problem is a nagging headache. The opposite of a headache is not just "no headache." It might be "peace and quiet" or something like "a calm, relaxed, pain-free way of being." This kind of bigger context, positively stated outcome will cause you to take different, usually longer-lasting action than simply trying to get rid of the headache while you carry on doing whatever caused it in the first place. The opposite of a noisy, hyperactive kid causing a disturbance at home or in class is not a docile kid drugged out on Ritalin. It's a kid engaged in appropriate challenge and masterful action, well supervised by a caring, compassionate adult.

One of the biggest flaws in problem solving approaches is that they are mostly driven by the *intensity* of problems. Most of the action is focused on getting relief from that intensity. Unfortunately, seeking relief from symptoms distracts you from the deeper causes of the problem. The action you take is partial and temporary. Here's how Robert Fritz describes it in his book, *The Path of Least Resistance*:

**THE PROBLEM**  
Leads to  
**ACTION**  
Leads to  
**LESS INTENSITY**  
Leads to  
**LESS ACTION**  
Leads to

**THE PROBLEM REMAINING!**

Taking aspirin to relieve a chronic stress headache makes it less likely that you'll change the underlying causes of the stress that give rise to the headache. Aspirin gives you relief, but it also lets you keep doing what caused the pain in the first place. Eventually, the pain comes back. Continuing to take aspirins might even lead to ulcers. Or worse. Fritz's colleague, Peter Senge cites research that shows most corporate stress management programs, by enabling workers to cope with ever greater amounts of stress, actually turn low-level burnout into acute breakdown. Eventually workers hit their breaking point and collapse.

The creative approach may take a little more focus and energy than the reactive, relief-driven, problem-focused approach but it will generate more satisfying and lasting rewards for both you and your child.

### **Basic Skills For Creating Almost Anything**

While there is no formula for creating results that matter, there is a form—a framework—that is common to all kinds of creating from the personal to professional to artistic. This form has five major elements that interact to produce results.

**1. Vision:** Creators craft a *vision* of each creation they want to create. You can have a vision for your life. You can also have a vision for each creation you want in your life: home, work, family, relationships, finances, leisure and learning, community, spirituality—*anything* that matters to you.

A big part of success comes from shaping visions into clear, compelling images of what you *truly* want. By focusing concepts like

“success,” or “a good relationship” into concrete, recognizable results you give them power. A good way to focus is to make mental pictures of what your results would look like if you actually created them. The difference between “A new car,” and “A dark blue, Honda Civic hatchback, with beige interior, sun roof, six-speaker CD system, and V-Tech engine,” is the difference between a concept and a vision.

A useful exercise you can try is to take the concept “a good life” and craft a clear, compelling vision of what that life would look like if you succeeded in filling it with the creations you most deeply long for. What would your work look like? What would your relationships look like? What would your home and family life look like? Your health? Your finances? Your leisure time? Your learning?

While you might not be totally in charge of everything that happens in your life, you can create what matters to you. If you do that, the life that emerges is much more likely to be rich, full, and fulfilling. You’re not likely to be depressed.

**2. Current Reality:** Once vision is clear, creators ground themselves in current reality. They assess where they are, from where they’re starting. Reality includes *all* the forces in play, including strengths, assets, experience, resources, and what you *already* have in place in relation to your vision. Assessing AQ and CORE is a critical part of describing current reality for my clients. Reality includes but does not emphasize problems, lack of resources, and adversity. It’s more important to focus on what you have than on what you don’t. It’s also more important to focus on what works than on what doesn’t!

Overall, the best strategy is to observe and assess reality objectively and accurately. *Describe* reality; don’t *judge* it. For example, saying, “My kid is a holy terror,” is judging. But, saying, “My kid is running up and down the stairs and I’m feeling stressed,” is a description. By describing reality, you take away its emotional charge, making it less of a force. Besides, judgments like these are almost always a bit irrational and therefore lead to negative consequences and bad feelings.



### **Reality Is Not the Enemy**

A friend, who was also one of my clients, used to call me up whenever she was in turmoil caused by something that had happened to her. She'd inevitably preface her remarks with the sentence, "Everything is screwed. Everything. It's all totally and utterly screwed!" Then she'd go on to tell me how it got screwed up and how badly she'd been done by. Finally, she'd lament that there was "nothing, at all," that she could do about it. She'd end up blaming herself for being so incompetent.

After a few minutes, she'd calm down and I'd ask her to describe exactly what happened. I just wanted the facts, not her editorial comments. I wanted descriptions, not judgments. As she described the situation objectively, she was able to see that only part of it was affected, and that only part of that part was actually "screwed up." Maybe there was something she could do about that part. By describing the adversity, rather than judging it, she was able to see reality more clearly. As reality no longer seemed so overwhelming, she increased her perception of control and was able to take ownership for the results she wanted. Furthermore, by replacing words like "all," "everything," and "totally," she was able to minimize the reach of the bad situation into the rest of her life.

Sadly, however, it took her a long time to change on her own. Part of her unseen reality was a strong belief that she "should be able" to learn this kind of thing on her own, without instruction and practice, just by reading or thinking about it. So she ignored all my suggestions that she take part in a skill-building workshop.

As it turned out, she couldn't master the skills on her own and kept coming to me whenever she was in crisis. Finally, for the sake of our friendship, I had to tell her that I couldn't help in crisis situations any more because it violated my personal and professional principles. She was becoming overly dependent on *my* intervention to deal with *her* difficulties and adversity. I am dedicated to empowering my clients, to making them self-reliant, not dependent. I told her I could no

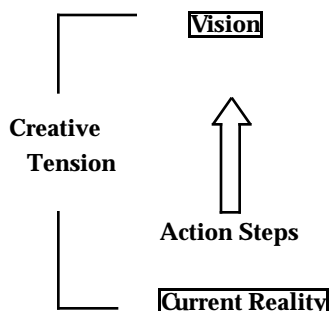
longer help her in crisis situations but would support her as a friend while she tried to work things out on her own.

After struggling for a while and working with other counselors, she did take one of my workshops. She was shocked when she realized that the belief that she “should” be able to do everything on her own had actually caused her to become dependent on expert intervenors. She agreed to practice the AQ skills and creating. As she got good at them, her life became much more effective. *It also became much more her own.*

**3. Creative Tension:** When you want something and don't have it, there is a discrepancy set up. Depending on how you arrange your desire for the result relative to your current reality, this discrepancy can either work for you, or it can work against you.

If you turn a desire into a demand (a *should, ought, must, or have to*), it will conflict with reality and set up emotional tension. The action you take will be to get rid of, or get relief from, the emotional tension you *don't* want, not to bring into being what you *do* want.

If you turn the desire into a vision of something you do want (such as “A successful home-based coaching business,” or “A healthy, happy family in which we support each other's growth,”) *and* you accept reality as it is, you will set up a positive discrepancy that generates a useful kind of *creative* tension.



Holding vision and reality in mind *together* sets up a gap out of which *creative tension* arises. Creative tension is the engine of creativity. More like attraction than emotional tension, it generates energy you can use to move toward your vision, and to keep moving when faced with problems, obstacles, setbacks, and other adversity. The capacity to set up and use creative tension is the mark of a creator. It is the skill that sets this approach apart from other approaches like “creative problem solving,” “visioning,” and “positive affirmations.”

**4. Action Steps:** Creative tension generates a container for *action*, a focused space for exploring, experimenting, and creating. Within the container of creative tension, creators start small: they set realistic goals, take small steps, and create patterns of success. Energy in all systems tends to follow the path of least resistance. In this system, the path of least resistance is to move from where you are to where you want to be. By keeping their focus on what they want, and their feet firmly grounded in reality, creators use the energy of creative tension to take action, to learn from mistakes, build momentum, and then take on larger goals. Gradually they shape the results they want.

Although the outcome—the creation—is usually predictable, the path to that outcome is often “inventional.” You make it up!

Creating is like sailing. You know where you want to go and you know where you’re starting from (or where you are at any moment). To get from here to there you work *with* the tides, currents, winds, and ever-changing reality. You’re not totally in charge of what happens. However, guided by vision, grounded in reality, and committed to creating, you do your best with whatever happens. As you do, a path of least resistance emerges between vision and reality. Following that path greatly increases your chances of producing the results you want.

Unlike powerboaters, who set up a path of least resistance that involves getting from here to there in the shortest time, and who use massive amounts of imported energy to work against the forces in play, sailors—and creators who master creative tension—never have to worry about running out of gas.

**5. Completion:** Finally, creators *finish fully* then acknowledge and celebrate their successes. They use the surge of energy that comes with *completion* to start new creations. Success builds upon success. Momentum continues to grow.

Together, these five skills of the creative process interact to consistently produce desired results. However, it is critical to realize that what makes creating so powerful is not just its inventiveness. Its true power comes the fact that it can both embrace *and* transcend (rise above) problems in favor of desired results. Problems and adversity become part of current reality. They no longer drive the action; vision does. You take reality into account, but it no longer pushes you around.

“Developing the capacity to create what matters, in spite of circumstances,” wrote Dottie and Gerard, a couple who took part in a *Depression-Proofing* workshop, “has greatly improved our competence and confidence. It’s made our kids—and us—hardier, more resilient, and better able to deal with stress. We feel optimistic now, more positive than we’ve ever felt.”

### **Integrating AQ with the Creative Process**

The creative process is the most powerful form for creating results ever devised. Developing AQ can turbo-charge that process, helping you to keep going when faced with adversity, and to produce outstanding results whatever problems or circumstances you face. Through helping people learn to create for nearly 20 years, I’ve seen some succeed beyond their wildest dreams. Others produce good to moderate results. And still others seem not to be able to put the skills and principles into consistent practice. After examining this discrepancy, I’ve found that the key factor separating those who learn to create from those who don’t is their explanatory style, their AQ. What determines who puts their learning into practice and who doesn’t is AQ. And what causes some to persist in the face of difficulty and setbacks and follow through to success is AQ.

The skills and framework of *creating* and the basics of AQ can help you develop the skills and confidence you need to safeguard yourself and your kids from most forms of pessimism and depression. It can help you lead yourself and your kids away from the viscous spiral of helplessness, hopelessness, and despair. Teaching your kids these skills can help lead them into the full flowering of their own natural powers, toward the success and quality of life they deserve. Why not try it? For your sake, *and* for your kids' sake.

I suspect that if more of us developed our capacity to create what matters and increased our AQ, there would be way less kids wandering the streets, "bored" and "way bummed out by stuff." I also a lot more of us and our kids would be living lives as happy, creative optimists.

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- For more information about depression, its treatment and prevention see: *Learned Optimism* (Pocket Books, 1990) and *The Optimistic Child* (HarperPerennial, 1995) by Martin Seligman; and *Adversity Quotient* (John Wiley & Sons, 1997) by Paul Stoltz. Also see *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* (Signet, 1980) and *The Feeling Good Handbook* (William Morrow, 1989), by Dr. David D. Burns.

- For information on the creative process see Robert Fritz's books, *The Path of Least Resistance* (Fawcett Columbine, 1984, 1989) and *Creating* (Fawcett Columbine, 1991) Also see Bruce Elkin's "Vision to Reality," a 100-page excerpt from his forthcoming book *Simplicity and Success*. It is available from the author. Watch the website [www.BruceElkin.com](http://www.BruceElkin.com) for more excerpts and publication details.

- The website of the National Institute of Mental Health ([www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/depchildmenu.cfm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/depchildmenu.cfm)) has fact sheets on depression in children for parents, teens, university students, and mental health professionals.

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Bruce Elkin is President of ***Summit Strategies***, a strategic design and planning firm that works with individuals, groups, and organizations. He studied and worked for nine years with Robert Fritz, author of *The Path of Least Resistance*. He was the first Canadian to administer Paul Stoltz's *Adversity Response Profile* (ARP). Since 1973, he's facilitated primary prevention workshops and coaching programs that help individuals increase their personal control and creativity. You can contact him at 250-537-1177 or [belkin@saltspring.com](mailto:belkin@saltspring.com). For more about Bruce, please visit [www.BruceElkin.com](http://www.BruceElkin.com)

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***“Optimism is not a cure-all. It will not substitute for good parenting. It will not substitute for a child’s developing strong moral values. It will not substitute for ambition and a sense of justice. Optimism is just a tool, but a powerful tool. In the presence of strong values and ambition, it is the tool that makes both individual accomplishment and social justice possible.”***

**Dr. Martin Seligman,  
*The Optimistic Child***

**Summit Strategies**

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