

*Cognitive  
Behavior  
Technique #33*

*Shoulds*

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**This technique is an adaption of the material in Chapter 7 in the book *Self-Esteem*, New Harbinger Publications, Inc, 1992 by Matthew McKay & Patrick Fanning.**

## Technique #33

## Shoulds

'Shoulds' are a limited thinking pattern or cognitive error which are defined in ***CBT#02 - Altering Limited Thinking Patterns***.

***'Shoulds' In this pattern, the person operates from a list of inflexible rules about how they and other people should, must, have to act. The rules are right and indisputable. Any deviation from the particular values or standards is bad. As a result, they are often judging others and finding fault. People irritate them. They don't act correctly and they don't think correctly. They have unacceptable traits, habits, and opinions that make them hard to tolerate. They should know the rules, and they should follow them.***

One woman believed that her husband should want to take her on Sunday drives. She decided that a man who loves his wife ought to take her to the country and then out to eat in a nice place. The fact that he didn't want to meant that he "only thought about himself". Cue words indicating the presence of this pattern are should, ought, or must. In fact, Albert Ellis (Ellis and Harper 1961) has dubbed this thinking pattern 'musterbation'.

Personal 'shoulds' are just as hard on the person as they are on other people. They feel compelled to be or act a certain way, but they fail to ask objectively if it really makes sense. Psychiatrist Karen Horney (1939) called this the "tyranny of 'shoulds'". It also should be noted that 'shoulds' make somebody wrong.

'Shoulds' often make the believer wrong and play a role in the self affirmation process. The Pathological Critic, a characteristic of negative self affirmation, uses the person's beliefs, values, 'shoulds' and rules to attack him/her, pointing out when and where s/he is wrong. The 'shoulds' that make up the person's rules for living form the ideological basic of the Critic's efforts to lower self appraisal. The Critic constantly evaluates what the person says, what s/he does and even what s/he feels by comparing him/her to an ideal of perfection defined by the rules ['shoulds'].

Consider the case of the student who gets three A's and a C on his report card. His/her beliefs about grades and success will entirely determine his/her reactions. If s/he uses the criteria of a B average as the standard for reasonable performance, s/he would be rather happy. On the other hand, if s/he believes that a C is totally unacceptable, a sign of stupidity or laziness, then the Critic will have a field day.

Values are very important to human beings. Throughout history people have been dying for their beliefs. What is it about the nature of belief that makes someone willing to surrender comfort, safety and even life so that s/he will not be guilty of wrong doing? The answer is that while the content of a belief may be arbitrary and even erroneous, the motivation for believing springs from the deepest human drives.

A child's first beliefs are generated out of the need to be loved and approved of by parents. In order to feel safe and cared for children tend to adopt their parents' beliefs about such things as how to work, how to handle anger, mistakes and pain, what are the proper goals in life, what is owed to parents and other family members, etc. These parental beliefs were shaped, in part, from the culture that they inhabit. Some of the beliefs are promoted by value laden words such as *commitment, honesty, generosity, dignity, intelligence, or strength*. Those terms, as well as their negative opposites, are used by people as value yardsticks to measure people and behavior.

A second group of beliefs is generated by the need to feel belonging and approval from peers and a third major force that helps shape personal beliefs is the need for emotional and physical well being. Included here is the need for self affirmation and the need to protect yourself from painful emotions such as hurt or loss, the need for pleasure, excitement, achievement and meaning, and the need to feel physically safe.

Since most beliefs are formed in response to needs, they have little to do with truth and reality except as parents, peers and the culture may define truth and reality. The 'rules' are created through the process of pattern formation, generalization and theory building of randomly collected data and specialized attractors [epigenetic rules]. While the process that generates 'shoulds' has nothing to do with the literal truth, it depends on

the *idea* of truth for its power. In order to feel motivated to act on a should, you have to be convinced of its veracity.

The tyranny of 'shoulds' is based on the distortion, the cognitive error, the absolute nature of belief, the unbending sense of right and wrong. The operative words in that statements are *absolute* and *unbending*, and this is what make certain 'shoulds' psychological unfit. You can tell whether your beliefs, rules and 'shoulds' are fit or not, by applying the following criteria.

- ***Are the rules rigid or flexible?***

Flexible rules allow for exceptions where circumstances warrant, while unfit rules are unbending and universally applied. They include words like *never, always, all, totally, perfectly* and so on.

- ***Are the rules owned or introjected?***

Owning a belief or should means that you have critically examined this rule for living and it still makes sense for you. This is in contrast to *introjected* rules, where you accept parental or other values without determining for yourself how valuable they are.

- ***Are the rules realistic or unrealistic?***

This means is the rule based on an assessment of positive versus negative consequences. A realistic value promotes behavior that leads to positive outcomes. Unrealistic values and should have nothing to do with outcomes. Some 'shoulds' are impossible because they are not under the control of the person proposing them. Consider the rule: I should get all **A**'s. Unless the student gives the grades as well as earns them, s/he has no control over the outcome. S/he may earn an **A** and not get it, or not earn and **A** and get it. It is true that this is not a normal process, but it could happen. The value of getting all **A**'s is based on the principle that good students get all **A**'s, not on the reality of the world.

- ***Are the rules life enhancing or diminishing?***

The values we hold should enhance our lives, not diminish it. If the rules

you live by make you happy, satisfied, and support emotional stability, that is very different than having a Pathological Critic that diminishes your self affirmation.

All of us have rules ['shoulds'] to live by. To not have something to strongly believe in would be psychologically unfit as well. It is not the presence of these personal rules, but the distorted properties of the rules that are of concern. It become important, therefore, that we are able to examine our personal rules and determine whether they are helpful or harmful. This process will require standards of judgement and the usual cognitive steps of awareness, attention, analysis, alternatives and adaption.

### ***Comparative Standards***

#### **Helpful**

flexible [exceptions]  
owned [examined and tested]  
realistic [based on consequences]  
life-enhancing

#### **Unhelpful**

rigid [global]  
introjected [unquestioned]  
unrealistic [based on 'rightness']  
life restricting

In order to help a child analyze his/her own 'shoulds', it will be important that s/he and you are able to use the comparative standards effectively. The following exercises are oriented to help you and the child test your perceptions.

### ***Exercise***

Jack is a fifteen year old who loves to work with his hands and specializes in working on cars. Last year, Jack decided that he would go to vocational school to study auto mechanics with the hope that he would someday own his own garage. Jack's father is a full time professor at a local university. He has always been disappointed that Jack didn't study harder and express a greater interest in academics. Despite the pleasure he gets from working with his hands, Jack has a nagging sense of failure. He feels that he should be preparing for college, like he and his father had always planned. He feels embarrassed that he isn't 'using his brain'. He is reconsidering going back to an academic curriculum despite the fact that

he has never done well academically. In his dilemma, he has even considered 'dropping out', feeling that he is wasting his life.

What is wrong with Jack's values? Which errors apply?

RIGID      INTROJECTED      UNREALISTIC      LIFE RESTRICTING

Jack's major problem is that he has introjected his father's value system without examining how it fits his unique needs and abilities. For years, he has been tortured by values and rules that have never been critically examined. If Jack had developed his own realistic values, he would have recognized the positive consequences of working with cars, a job he enjoys and does well, as opposed to struggling with the rigors of an academic career.

### ***Exercise***

Jane has been a good student through elementary and secondary school, but has never made the honor roll. Jane's biggest problem is that she feels like a failure every time s/he doesn't get an A. While an occasional B or C is inevitable and every student anticipates a certain number of them, Jane believes that a good student must always make A's. Jane concludes that she is 'screwing up' and hasn't been sufficiently attentive to her school work.

RIGID      INTROJECTED      UNREALISTIC      LIFE RESTRICTING

Jane's rules are too rigid. She expects to be perfect in an imperfect world. Flexible values allow for being human. You must expect to make mistakes and build a reasonable expectation into your standards.

These sample exercises should allow you to create examples oriented to the age and development of the child you are working with to help him/her learn how to analyze his/her own 'shoulds'.

'Shoulds' attack your self affirmation in two ways. First, they may not fit you. The fact that many of the 'shoulds' you learned from culture, parents and peers may simply not apply to you. The values created by others to fit their own needs in their own unique circumstances need not be yours.

They may not be ignored, for such rules have merit, but they can be altered after examination as not being helpful. When 'shoulds' demand behavior that is impossible, they are unhealthy.

A second way that 'shoulds' are harmful is that they attack moral concepts of rightness and wrongness to situations, behaviors and taste that are essentially nonmoral. This process starts in childhood with parents telling you that you are good when you follow their rules and bad when you break their rules. Such a process is normally quite helpful and effective. It is not the fact that rules of behavior are projected by parents that is the problem, but the fact that they are absorbed unexamined. A child does not normally begin to question these 'shoulds' until adolescence, but they can have a negative effect well before then. When they are rigid and unrealistic as well, they become life restricting.

The process that usually happens developmentally is that the child absorbs the wisdom of his/her parents, culture and peers and examines that wisdom within his/her own life experience. This examination leads to modifications of the values within the limits of flexibility and realism, which allows the values to be owned by the child/young adult and, therefore, not life restricting. It is only when the child accepts, without question, values that are harmful to him/her and then applies them rigidly that the problems arise.

While the process of examination reaches a culmination in adolescence [the teenage rebellion], it doesn't start then. Children seek meaning of experiences from birth and around age four or five have created a naive theory of meaning that carries them forward. If this theory of meaning is skewed by rigidity and unrealistic expectations, it creates problems in living and, if it creates problems in living, these thoughts should be captured and re-evaluated. That is the process of correcting cognitive errors that you as a change worker have undertaken. The process is immutable: awareness, attendance, analysis, alternatives and adaption.

DISCOVERING SHOULDS [See also ***CBT#01 - Perceiving Reflex Thoughts***]

What follows is an inventory process that will help the child identify some of his/her 'shoulds'. Remember that personal rules are not a problem. The

term 'shoulds' is specifically used to indicate where personal rules have become a problem. Each item on the inventory represents a particular area of life. **Ask the child the following four [04] questions for each area.**

1. Do you have feelings of guilt or self-recrimination in this area - either past or present?
2. Do you feel conflicted in this area? For example, do you feel torn between doing something you should do versus doing something you want to do?

**SHOULD INVENTORY**

**CBT#33-001**

<p>Relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mother</li> <li>• father</li> <li>• sister</li> <li>• brother</li> <li>• friends</li> <li>• people in need</li> <li>• teachers</li> <li>• employers</li> <li>• other</li> </ul>	<p>Activities in the home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• maintenance</li> <li>• cleaning</li> <li>• decorating</li> <li>• straightening</li> </ul>	<p>Recreational/Social Activities</p>
<p>Creative Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• art</li> <li>• music</li> </ul>	<p>School Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• efficiency</li> <li>• peer relations</li> <li>• teacher relations</li> <li>• initiative</li> <li>• reliability</li> <li>• achievement</li> </ul>	<p>Self-improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• growth experiences</li> <li>• self help projects</li> </ul>
<p>Community Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• volunteering</li> </ul>	<p>Religious Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• going to church</li> <li>• praying</li> </ul>	<p>Money/Finance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• spending habits</li> <li>• savings</li> <li>• financial goals</li> <li>• earning capacity</li> </ul>
<p>Food/Eating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dieting</li> </ul>	<p>Expressing Feelings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• anger</li> <li>• fear</li> <li>• sadness</li> <li>• physical pain</li> <li>• joy</li> <li>• sexual attraction</li> <li>• love</li> </ul>	<p>Self Care</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• appearance</li> <li>• dress</li> <li>• exercise</li> <li>• smoking</li> <li>• alcohol</li> <li>• drugs</li> <li>• prevention</li> </ul>
<p>Inner Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unexpressed             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- feelings</li> <li>- thoughts</li> <li>- wishes</li> </ul> </li> </ul>		

3. Do you feel a sense of obligation or owing in this area?

4. Do you avoid something you think you ought to do in this area?

When the child recognizes the presence of guilt, conflict, obligation or avoidance in a particular area, it is usually fairly easy to identify the underlying 'should'. For example, for the item 'activities in the home', the child may recall that s/he feels rather *guilty* about not helping with the dishes and the laundry. The underlying 'should' is the belief that the child should help his/her mother with the work. Guilt, conflict and obligation are operative words.

Sometimes, despite the clear presence of guilt, conflict or obligation, the underlying 'should' is hard to ferret out. You can then suggest that the child use the procedure called 'Laddering'.

**Laddering:** Laddering is a way of analyzing your internal monologue statements by looking for more and more basic underlying assumptions and predictions until you arrive at statements of core belief. The technique is called laddering because it proceeds step by step. Laddering has only two rules. Rule number 1 is to question yourself with the following format, and Rule number 2 is don't answer with a *feeling*. The format is to ask:

'What if \_\_\_\_\_? What does it mean to me?'  
In the blank space the client writes a self-statement from his/her internal monologue. Then s/he writes the answer to the question. Having done that, have the client use the answer to fill in the blank and ask the question again. After using this sequence a few times, the client will arrive at a core belief. The answers must be confined to statements that express conclusions, beliefs or assumptions - not descriptions of feelings.

For example, when the child feels guilty about his/her mother as an 'inner experience', s/he may ask the question 'What if I am guilty about my mother, what does it mean to me?'. The answer may be that it makes him/her feel angry. Then the question would be 'What if I am angry at my mother, what does it mean to me?'. The answer may mean that s/he believes her mother imposes upon her. The question would then be "What if my mother imposes on me, what does it mean to me?". The

answer might be that the child sees the mother as imposing much of the chores of the family on him/her. In the final analysis, the child may be going back to the expectations that s/he participate more in the activities in the home. Keep asking questions until the child has gotten down to what feels like a core statement, something that implies a clear value or personal rule.

Avoid these two dead ends: 1) don't let the child answer with a simple judgment such as 'I'm bad'. Try instead to help the child state the *basis* of the judgement, the value from which the judgment arises, and 2) don't let the child answer with a feeling, such as 'It means I'm going to feel afraid'.

When the child uncovers a number of 'shoulds' that describe how s/he ought to behave, make a written list of them. You are now in a position to analyze these rules to determine if they are effective. Some of these should function as reasonable guides to his/her behavior. Check those that are used by the Critic in negative ways. For each of these, do the following three [03] things:

1. **Examine the language.** Is the 'should' built on absolutes and overgeneralizations such as *all, always, never, totally, perfect*, and so on? If so, reframe the 'should' with phrases such as: 'I would prefer', or 'I would rather', or 'I want to'. Acknowledge the possibility of exception by flexible and realistic language.
2. **Forget concepts of right and wrong.** Instead, determine the consequences of applying the rule to specific situations. What are the short and long term effects on the child and the other people involved. Does the rule make sense to the child, given who will get hurt and who will be helped?
3. **Ask if the rule fits the person you really want to be.** Does it take into account your temperament, limitations, enduring traits, ways of protecting yourself, fears, problems and things that you are not likely to change?

### **Example**

Rebecca's case is a good example of how these steps will help the child

deal with his/her 'shoulds'. Her list included a 'should' that her Pathological Critic used almost daily. The Critic said she should weigh no more than 120 pounds, while Rebecca, in fact, weighed 135-140 pounds.

The first thing Rebecca did was to examine her language. The phrase 'no more than 120 pounds' gave the 'should' an absolute quality. Rebecca rewrote her rule more flexibly - 'I would prefer to weigh in the neighborhood of 120 pounds'. Next, she examined the possible consequences of applying her 'should'. Here is her list of positive and negative outcomes.

**Positive**

- look slimmer
- fit into some of my smaller clothes
  
- feel more attractive
  
- like my body more

**Negative**

- have to weigh my food
- constantly thinking about what I eat
- constantly worry about gaining weight
- have to go back to Weightwatchers
- Really have to eat less
- Most of my clothes will no longer fit

While liking her body and feeling more attractive were a big lure for Rebecca, the negative consequences were much greater than she had realized.

Finally, Rebecca asked herself whether the '120 pound rule' fit the person she really was. She had to admit that her natural weight seemed to be where she was and only arduous dieting was able to get into the 125 range. A diet meant curtaining her main way of being with friends. Her boyfriend was clearly attracted to her as she was. With some reluctance, Rebecca began to accept that the '120 pound rule' didn't fit her and seemed to be costing more than it was worth.

CHANGING THE 'SHOULD' [See also ***CBT#02 - Altering Limited Thinking*** and/or ***CBT#03 - Changing Distressing Thoughts***]

When the child has decided that a 'should' is undermining his/her self appraisal either as a general rule or in a particular situations, s/he will need to cut it out of his/her internal self talk. This means aggressively fighting back when the Critic tries to hit you with a 'should'. One of the best ways to fight back is to create a **mantra** that can be used to dispute. A mantra can be a word or phrase repeated to aid our memory. When we repeat it over and over we remember it. In fact, based on the rules of repetition and habituation, the mantra itself can become a nonconscious comment.

A mantra to combat a 'should' would ideally include the following elements:

- ***A reminder of the original need that created the 'should'.***

For this the child will have to determine why s/he acquired the should in the first place. To feel loved? To feel wanted? To feel less anxious? Safer?

- ***The main reason the should does not fit you or the situation.***

The child might remind him/herself, for example, how the 'should' demands that you be or do or feel something that is simply not you. You might remind yourself that the negative consequences of following the 'should' outweigh the positive.

## **Examples**

Here are some examples of how a mantra might sound when condensed into a few simple statements

**Should:** You should go back to school and make something of your life.

**Mantra:** School was my father's dream and I wanted to please him. That doesn't fit me. I would only drop out again from boredom and pressure.

**Should:** You should never make mistakes.

**Mantra:** Not making mistakes was important to my mother. But I'm still learning and I can only learn by trying. If I worry about mistakes, I will freeze up and stop learning.

## ATONEMENT - WHEN 'SHOULD'S' MAKE SENSE

Some of the 'shoulds' will turn out to be legitimate values, rules to live by that the child needs to follow to the best of his/her ability. NOTE: which shoulds fit this category are not your decision. As the changeworker, your responsibility is to help the child discover these for him/herself. When 'shoulds' make sense they don't usually interfere with the child's self appraisal. The only time sensible 'shoulds' interfere with self appraisal is when you violate them. If, after examination, the rule you violated makes sense to you, the only way to stop your critic is to initiate the process of atonement. NOTE: this critic is not capitalized for this is your conscious speaking. Very simply, you will have to make up for what you have done. Without atonement, the child will be saddled with a Critic whose function is to make sure s/he pays.

There are four [04] guidelines to help the child choose an appropriate atonement.

1. **It is important that the child acknowledge the wrongness of what s/he did *to the person s/he hurt.***

This makes it clear that s/he accepts responsibility for his/her behavior.

2. **S/he should atone directly to the person s/he wronged.**

Donating money to charity, become a volunteer, or some other good deed will atone less effectively than directly helping the one you hurt.

3. **The atonement should be real, rather than symbolic.**

Lighting candles or writing a poem will not rid the child of his/her Critic. What s/he does to atone has to cost something in time, money, effort or event anxiety. And it has to be tangible enough so that it has an impact on the relationship with the person who was hurt.

4. **The atonement should be commensurate with the wrong done.**

If the offense was a moment of irritability, then a brief apology will do the trick. But if s/he has been hostile and remote for six months, s/he will have to do better than 'I'm sorry'.

CONCLUSION

It is important that all children have rules of life that help them learn how to behave appropriately in the world. However, when these rules get out of hand, they need to be addressed. This technique is particularly useful as part of **CBP#08 - Self Affirmation** protocol.