

See the Big Picture

Objective

To manage your emotions by making sure you are seeing the “big picture” and not just paying attention to the negative aspects of a situation.

You Should Know

When a situation triggers overwhelming emotions, it is common to only pay attention to the upsetting or painful parts of your experience. As a result, you may overreact to the situation and jump to conclusions that are not based in reality. By focusing on the negative things you experience – a type of thinking called “negative filtering” – you limit your ability to experience the realities of that situation.

Here are some examples of negative filtering thoughts:

- Amy accidentally deleted one page of notes before her class presentation. As she spoke, she tried to remember those missing points but became increasingly self-conscious, stammering through the rest of the presentation.
Negative filtering thought: “I can’t do anything right.”
- Mike broke his ankle after slipping on an icy sidewalk and it prevented him from going on an important business trip.
Negative filtering thought: “This is just my luck. Why does this stuff always happen to me?”
- Cassie’s boyfriend broke-up with her after dating for 5 months. This was her second breakup in less than a year.
Negative filtering thought: “Why can’t I find the right guy? What’s wrong with me?”

What You Should Do

Seeing the “big picture” means evaluating a situation from all sides, not just the negative aspects. Seeing the big picture enables you to take a step back from a difficult situation and observe things in a more objective way. This helps you better manage the thoughts and emotions that arise.

There are several questions that can guide you to see the big picture. In this example, Amy will answer the questions.

1. What happened during this situation?

“I deleted a page from my presentation and got so distracted that I had a hard time focusing.”

2. How did you think and feel as a result of this situation?

Thoughts: *"I can't do anything right."*

Feelings: *"Embarrassed and mad at myself."*

3. What evidence supports your thoughts and feelings?

"In spite of the hours I spent preparing, I still screwed up."

4. What evidence opposes your thoughts and feelings?

"I'm doing well in this class and my other classes, too."

5. What would be a more accurate and objective way to think and feel about this situation?

"I'm disappointed in myself. I moved too fast and deleted an important page. I'll be more careful next time."

6. How could you react to that situation in a healthier way (e.g., calling a friend, using positive statements)?

"I'm human, and mistakes happen to everyone."

Now, it's your turn. Think of a recent negative situation where you felt badly because you were only seeing the negative aspects of the situation. Use the following chart to help you see the big picture.

Questions About the Situation	Your Answers
What happened during this situation?	
How did you think and feel as a result of this situation?	Thoughts: Feelings:
What evidence supports your thoughts and feelings?	
What evidence opposes your thoughts and feelings?	
What would be a more accurate and objective way to think and feel about this situation?	
How could you react to that situation in a healthier way?	

Do you often only see the negative aspects of a situation? Give another example of when you have done this.

What is an area of life where it will help you most to see the “big picture” (e.g., work, school, relationships, family, and so on)?

Do you know of anyone else who has difficulty in seeing the “big picture?” How does negative filtering affect them?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
