



# What Triggers Your Emotional and Behavioral Reactions?

It might seem as if people and events in the world are directly responsible for our feelings. For instance, it is not uncommon to hear someone say, “He made me mad” or “She made me cry.” It can certainly feel like such statements are true. But are they really?

Suppose you are driving on the road and you are approaching a stop sign at an intersection. What happens when you get there? If you’re like most people, you might answer that question by saying something like, “Well... you stop.” That response seems to make sense on the surface. It’s easy to believe that stop signs “make” people stop.



But is that really what happens? Have you ever rolled through a stop sign? Have you ever blown by a stop sign without seeing it? Even if you haven’t personally, it’s likely that you have seen someone else do these things. Clearly, stop signs don’t “make” people stop. If they did, we would all stop every time we approached one.

What causes you to stop is more complicated than the sign itself. There is actually a chain reaction at work. That chain reaction has to do with what we might call the **ABCs of CBT** (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy).

# A

**Activating Event**

*Something that someone does, something that happens in the world, or something that you encounter*

# B

**Beliefs**

*What you tell yourself about the Activating Event, the story you make up about its meaning*

# C

**Consequences**

*Both what you feel as a result of your beliefs and how you behave in reaction to those beliefs*

Let's return to the stop sign example. Let's say that a driver, Steve, is traveling through a neighborhood where the police tend to patrol aggressively. Steve reminds himself that he has seen a lot of people get pulled over. He has already been pulled over many times before, and he believes that he would lose his license if he were to get pulled over again. He tells himself that he should really change his ways and drive more responsibly. He is sure that his wife would be angry with him if he lost his license. He thinks his boss might fire him if he could no longer drive to work. This series of **beliefs** about himself and his circumstance might lead him to feel guilty and embarrassed about his past behavior and anxious about getting pulled over again. His emotional discomfort would then lead him to stop at the stop sign.

Now let's imagine a different driver, John, approaching the very same stop sign. John has never been pulled over or been ticketed for any moving violation before. He thinks of himself as a very responsible driver. He has never seen any police officers in the neighborhood and does not believe that he would be pulled over if he were to run a stop sign. He has his pregnant wife in the car with him, and he is determined to get her to the hospital as fast as he can because he believes that she is likely to deliver their baby at any moment. He also believes that, if he were to get pulled over, a police officer would understand his emergency and not ticket him for failing to stop. John's **beliefs** are very different from Steve's, even though both Steve and John are approaching the very same stop sign. John's beliefs do not lead him to feel guilty, embarrassed, or anxious. Instead, John feels confident, determined, and justified in his decision to drive right on through the stop sign.

In this example, both men face the very same *stressor* or **Activating Event** (the stop sign), yet they have very different emotional reactions and behavioral responses to it – one man stops while the other one goes. If stop signs “made” people stop, both men would stop. If stop signs “made” people go, both men would go. However, the stop sign is the same for both men and yet their reactions are different. This means that it is not the sign itself that causes emotional or behavioral **consequences**; instead, it is something else – their **beliefs** about the stop sign. Their different beliefs lead to very different emotional and behavioral reactions.



In the same way that this simple example is true, the **ABCs of CBT** apply to any stressor we can imagine – even the big ones. Stressors do not have a rigid meaning attached to them.

***Our beliefs about stressors (Activating Events) are what lead to our feelings and our behaviors.***

It is not accurate to say “He made me mad.” It would be more accurate to say, “My **beliefs** about his actions led me to feel angry.” If your goal is to change the way you are feeling or behaving in response to stress, be sure to look at your thought process and be prepared to change your beliefs.



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