

## **The Cycle of Reactive Thought**

What is reactive thought? It is what it sounds like it is. Reactive thought revolves around how a person chooses to make sense and give meaning to events. Reactive thought follows a cycle, in which either negative or positive ideas, feelings, and “reactions” can reinforce themselves.

After becoming familiar with the information in these pages, you can present it to participants in your national service program, facilitate discussion, and lead an individual activity. The ultimate outcome of the session is that participants take away a healthier approach to dealing with negative events.

The resource opens with two short narratives that illustrate reactive thought and spur on discussion. They are followed by an illustration of how reactive thought spins in a cycle. Lastly, there is an individual activity for participants to engage in and, if appropriate, share back with the group.

### **A Short Story**

Three men were dismissed from their jobs due to a reduction in force. They each had different thoughts about their situation.

The first man said, “Just my rotten luck ... something always happens to me when I need my job most. What did I do to deserve this?”

The second man said, “Sometimes you have a job, sometimes you don’t. I don’t have one now. Once again, it’s time to hit the street and find one.”

The third man said, “The boss didn’t get laid off. Man, I would like to smash my supervisor’s face ... it makes me so mad.”

### **Questions:**

1. Which man accepted the lay off as a fact of life? How do you think he felt?
2. How did each of the other men end up feeling?
3. Give an example of when you felt bad due to your interpretation of some given event in your life.
4. What is the meaning of the phrase: “There are no problems outside of the mind?”

## **Another Vignette**

Jerry is a high school student. He was going to his date's house to pick her up. He felt excited and great until he got out of the car. As he was walking up to the door, he started wondering, "Is she going to like me? Am I dressed the right way? Will she think I am fun to be with?" By the time he got to the door, he was so nervous he momentarily forgot his date's name.

### **Questions:**

1. What thoughts did Jerry have that made him feel so nervous?
2. How do you think his date went?
3. Have you ever had an experience like this? Do you know what you were thinking that clouded over the good feeling you had just moments before?
4. Did you enjoy having that good feeling replaced with a not-so-good feeling? Is that negative feeling something you wanted?

*There is a lesson to be learned from unwanted feelings,*

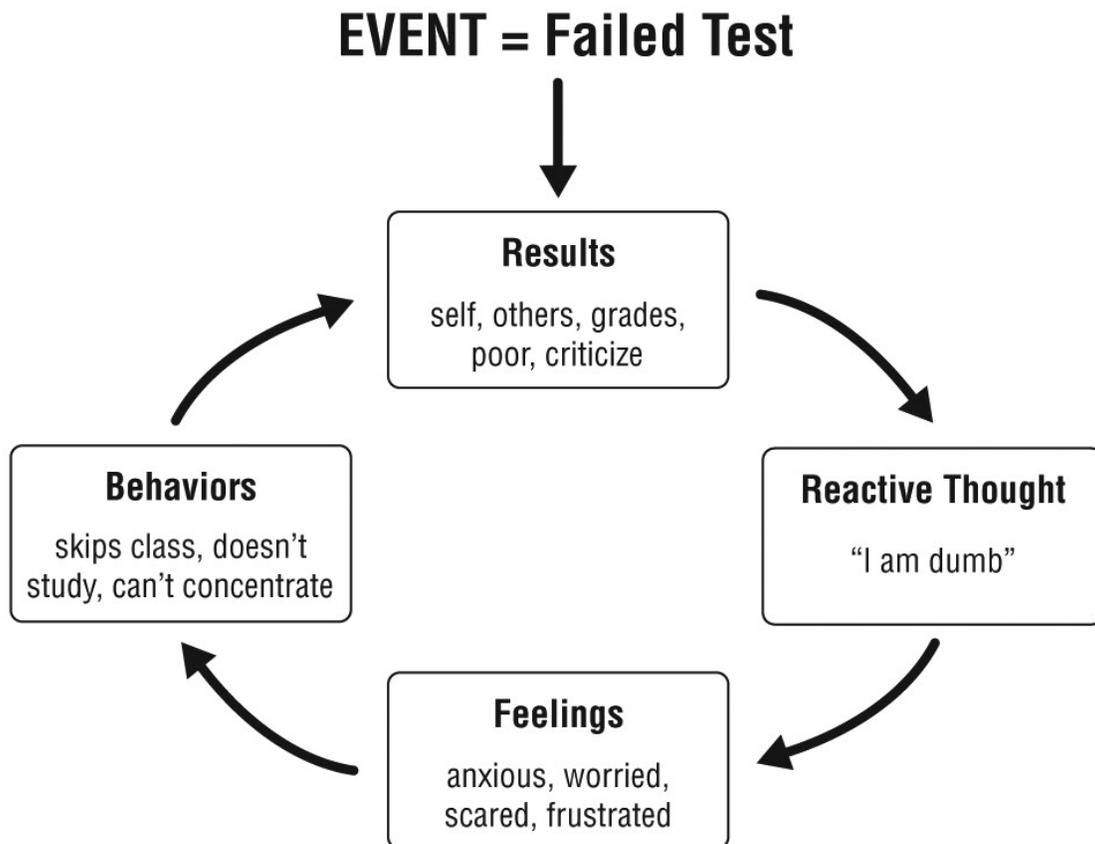
*which is that we have used our thinking poorly.*

*Unwanted emotions always let us know that we are thinking poorly.*

## Reactive Thoughts

Ted just found out that he failed his math test and must retake it within two weeks and pass, or he will fail the class.

If Ted **thinks** “I’m dumb,” he will unintentionally prove it by how he **feels** and **behaves**. His reactive thought becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Study the sequence in the diagram below to see how such thoughts can set off behaviors and a chain of events.



## Individual Activity

The following exercise will help you internalize how **thoughts** influence our **feelings** and **behavior**. Here are some common thoughts:

I have to please others.

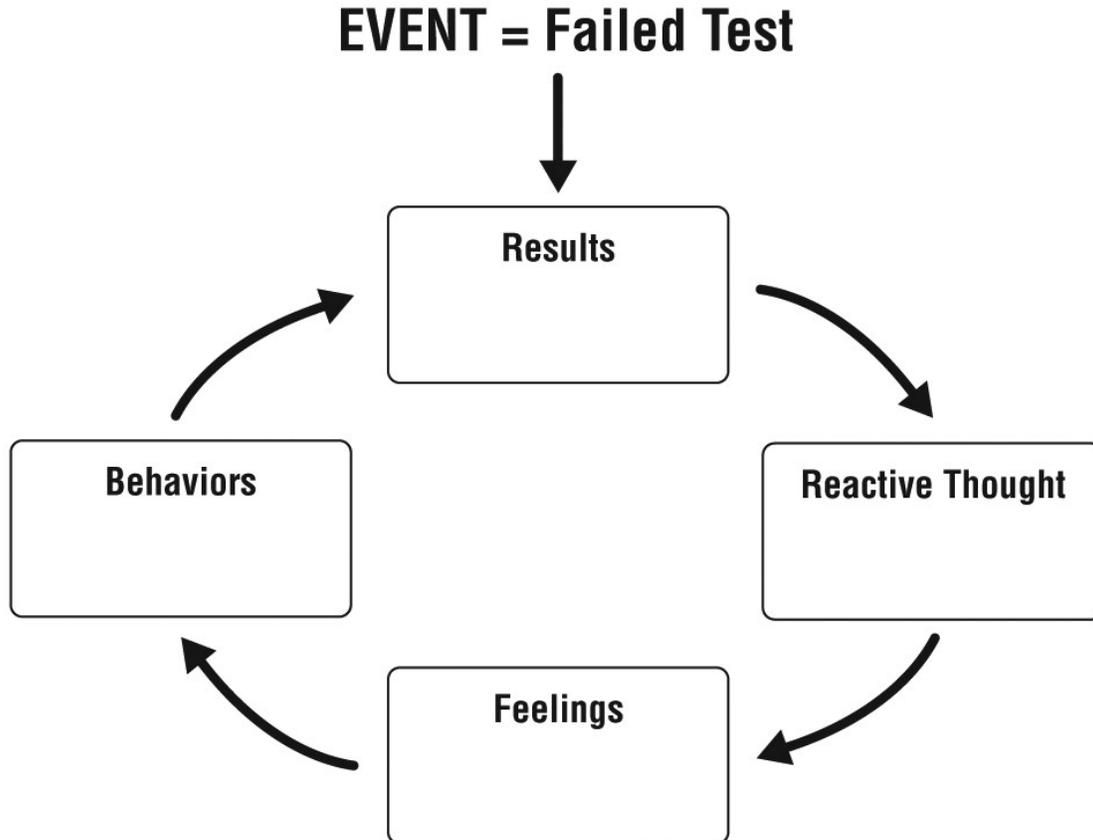
I am \_\_\_\_\_.

I am too \_\_\_\_\_.

I can't do this right.

I don't belong.

1. Take on one of these thoughts or one that you know you frequently have.
2. Write that thought in the **Reactive Thought** box.
3. Then, fill in the **Feelings, Behaviors,** and **Results** boxes.



### Questions:

1. What did you come up with?
2. Could a negative thought cause you a problem?
3. How can you get beyond the reactive thought cycle to a more productive/desired state?