Motivation II: Overcoming Negative Thinking

Have you ever said to yourself, "I don't see why I have to do this assignment"? It may sound innocuous enough, but when you look more closely at this statement, what you really might be saying is, "There's no point to this assignment." Take for example another statement, "This class is too hard." An underlying message to that may be "I can't do the work." Negative or distorted thinking can impede our motivation. In the Fall issue of Illuminations, we discussed ways to enhance our motivation for school. In this issue, we will focus on overcoming negative thinking.

Consider the difficulty certain thoughts can cause us:

"I can tell by the way the teacher looks at me that he doesn't like me." This thought pattern is characterized as mind-reading: trying to interpret what someone else is thinking.

"If I don't do well on this exam, I will probably fail the course, and end up kicked out of college." Exaggerating the consequences of events or expecting disaster is called catastrophizing.

"I can tell by the end of the first class whether a course is going to be great or a waste of time. Just as I predicted, this one is worthless." Thinking in extremes, where there is no middle ground or compromise is called polarized thinking.

"I can't believe what I said in class today...After today's screw-up, I'm going to keep my mouth shut, even if it costs me a participation grade." Reaching a general conclusion based on a single incident or piece of evidence is called overgeneralization.

"It ticks me off that I didn't get the professor I want, especially since I'm paying all this money. No wonder I'm not learning anything." Holding other people responsible for your problems, or conversely, blaming yourself for everyone else's problems is considered blaming.

These types of distorted thinking -- based on illogical, erroneous, or faulty reasoning - can result in negative emotion that then impedes our motivation and subsequently our academics. Another area of distorted thinking entails thought patterns of "shoulds". "Shoulds" are ironclad rules about how you and other people ought to act. Consider these "shoulds" which many people have about professors: (removed the bold and added bullets for emphasis)

- Instructors should be interesting.
- Instructors should have all the answers.
- Instructors should not give a lot of work.
- Instructors should motivate their students.
- Instructors should make exceptions for some students.

These "should be" thoughts would be nice to entertain, but how would we like our instructors to measure us against these same standards of "should"?

- Students should make the class interesting.
- Students should always research questions they have before asking the instructor.
- Students should want to work hard.
- Students should be self motivated.

• Students should not expect to have exceptions made under any circumstances.

The more rules we have about others' behavior, the more we are apt to become angry or frustrated when our demands are not met. These negative feelings compromise our learning process. Try saying, "I would prefer that..."instead of setting the standard of "should."

Myths about college instructors can also cause problems and disappointment. Disengagement frequently follows after false expectations.

I can't learn from an instructor I don't like. Of course we prefer to learn from someone we like, but thinking "I can't" (when more accurately it's "I won't") inhibits our learning.

Professors are trained to be effective teachers. The reality is that graduate school training has generally focused on scholarly research, not teaching. More is being done to train instructors on effective teaching, such as RU psychologist/professor Steven Meyer's work. However, students may encounter poor teaching and although this is unfortunate, you have the responsibility to learn nonetheless.

Professors will be nonjudgmental and unbiased in presenting material. While this is true for many teachers, it is not true for all. Some teachers may believe they have the ultimate truth and see no point in discussing opposing views and/or see this style of teaching as challenging. This can be a great learning opportunity. It's important to carefully evaluate what you hear and take it as an opportunity to improve your critical thinking.

Professors have all the answers. No one has all the answers. Instructors are not always experts even on every topic they teach; for example, their advanced degree may be in a specialty area unrelated to the topic they are teaching. Most people are able to admit they do not have an answer to a question. If your professor does not answer questions to your satisfaction, consider researching the topic on your own, but be careful to not simply dismiss an instructor who is not perfect.

Professors personally believe and accept the material they present in class. Some professors present views they oppose in the interest of covering a topic more thoroughly; others may play "devil's advocate" to challenge thinking and stimulate discussion.

Certain beliefs can interfere with learning by diminishing our motivation to listen to what is being said. We may hear a class discussion but miss main points because we assume we know what the instructor is about to say. Or we may have such strong beliefs about a subject that we refuse to listen to ideas that do not fit neatly with what we believe to be true. It is easier to listen to messages that confirm our beliefs and to dismiss messages that are inconsistent with our point of view.

It's important to direct your attention to the message, reserve judgment, and try to understand the speaker's perspective. Keep your mind open to different viewpoints. This is what learning is – an active, cooperative process with someone who knows something more than you about a particular area -- or has a different point of view. In evaluating our thinking, a simple rule of thumb to ask ourselves is whether a belief is helping us to achieve our goals and dreams, or is it holding us back?

Reference:

Dembo, Myron. Motivation and learning strategies for college success: a self-management approach. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.