

## Student Perceptions of School

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## Background

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Students' perceptions of school events, the nature of teachers' expectations, and the patterns of interaction between students and teachers have an impact on their academic attitudes and behaviors. The way we look at situations, places, and things reflects the way we view the world and influences the conclusions and decisions we make. **Our perception of an event is a personal interpretation of information from our own perspective.**

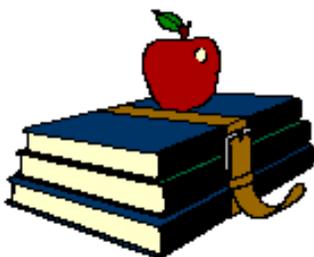
The influence of schools on students' academic performance is derived from a student's individual perception rather than the "objective" reality of the activities and interpersonal relations in the educational environment. In this intervention, the focus is on changing the way students think, as it is not a situation that directly affects how a person feels emotionally, but rather his or her thoughts in that situation. **We feel what we think.**

Our perceptions are often the result of **automatic processing**, and while automaticity is efficient for processing much information quickly, it is not always accurate. Many **faulty cognitions** are automatic, involuntary, and highly plausible to the individual.

A goal of this module is to help students recognize and analyze their automatic thoughts and perceptions so they can replace distorted or negative perceptions and cognitions with more realistic and non-negative appraisals. The focus is on personal responsibility and choice.

**The three fundamental propositions of this intervention are:**

1. **Cognitive activity influences behavior.**
2. **Cognitive activity may be monitored and altered.**
3. **Desired behavior change may be affected through cognitive change.**



## Why Is There a Need to Address Students' Perceptions of School?

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Our perceptions affect our emotions and behaviors and our emotional and behavioral reactions also help shape our environments and skew our beliefs of those environments. A fundamental position of **attribution theory** is that we behave according to our perception and understandings. Attribution is part of our cognition of the environment, and is often used to feel a sense of control. We make attributions to make our world more manageable and predictable.

One of our most important attributes is ability. Much of our performance is evaluated, by ourselves and by others, by assessing performance ability or competence. The attribution of high ability can be limiting, as it carries the obligation to perform at increasingly higher levels. Adolescents who are underachieving may be exerting control over their own actions and environment by using self-serving attributions. By attributing lack of school success to external factors, for example, a student may not have to accept personal responsibility for his lack of success, and thus the negative quality of underachievement is reduced. A student who believes a lack of success is caused by external and presumably uncontrollable sources preserves her self-image. If a gifted student is feeling too much pressure to succeed, he may purposefully underachieve to prove he "isn't so smart after all." Students' perceptions of their educational experiences influence their academic performance. One way to preserve one's own perception of high ability, especially if poor performance is perceived to be likely, is to reduce the level of effort and not try.

For more on attribution theory: [www.as.wvu.edu/~sbb/comm221/chapters/attrib.htm](http://www.as.wvu.edu/~sbb/comm221/chapters/attrib.htm)

or "Attribution Theory and Achievement" at [menthelp.net/psyhelp/chap4/chap4k.htm](http://menthelp.net/psyhelp/chap4/chap4k.htm)

**Schemas** are cognitive structures we use to organize and reorganize incoming information and provide theories or hypotheses for future data. Information is screened, highlighted, or stored based on how it fits into our schemas. Individual schemas and perceptions are not all correct. According to the **Individual Psychology** of Alfred Adler, how a student views her intellectual ability and subsequently cultivates and uses it will affect achievement more than the mere possession of a certain IQ. It is not a lack of knowledge, but perceptual styles and faulty beliefs and schemas that may be the problem when a student underachieves. Students who tend to hold **negative perceptions** about themselves and others tend to interpret events pessimistically. A negative worldview can become a way of life and can have a negative impact on achievement. This module, based on an Adlerian approach that emphasizes personal responsibility, is a collaborative process to identify and correct distortions, exaggerations, and mistakes in students' cognitive schemas.

Children develop convictions, conclusions, and generalizations that become cognitive schemas. These schemas are truths for the individual, regardless of their benefit to the individual. **Irrational schemas** are sets of unreasonable or distorted expectations about the way the world is and the way it ought to be. Some inaccurate, or negative information may be more deeply processed than accurate information. Unfortunately, negative behavior is given greater weight when forming impressions that become our perceptions. This is true for teachers as well as students. It is important to notice what an underachieving student is doing right. Hanging on to negative labels is not conducive to growth or change.

For more on Adler's Individual Psychology:  
[ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/hstein](http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/hstein)

For more on dysfunctional schemas:  
"The Structural Model of Cognition," R. W. Westermeyer at  
[www.habitsmart.com/pin.html](http://www.habitsmart.com/pin.html)



## Why Use the Cognitive Therapy Approach?

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Cognitive therapy is time-limited, short-term, directive, structured, goal-oriented, and collaborative, making it an ideal framework for an intervention by teachers with their middle school students. Cognitive interventions are **brief** and focus on the present problem and finding alternative solutions. This approach is practical and easy to understand by teachers and students. It does not focus on the problems, but directly on solutions.

By emphasizing the correction of systematic cognitive errors, a student is helped to think non-negatively. It is important to distinguish between thinking non-negatively and thinking positively. This is not just an exercise in semantics. It is easy to recognize a negative thought like "I hate everything about school." While it is unrealistic to believe that we can totally turn this around to a positive "I really like everything about school," cognitive interventions can help a student think non-negatively enough to realize that "Some things at school aren't so bad."

Merely acknowledging a belief is irrational is not enough to change it. Since this is a **skill-based approach**, students are expected to eventually identify their irrational or inaccurate perceptions, evaluate how realistic the thoughts are, and change their distorted thinking on their own. Teenagers tend to prefer action to words and seek to assert their independence. Cognitive, brief, **solution-focused** interventions (as outlined in Lesson 1) that rely on personal responsibility and choices are ideal for teenagers.

### For more information and readings on cognitive therapy:



- The Beck Institute of Cognitive Therapy and Research: [www.beckinstitute.org](http://www.beckinstitute.org) and [www.cognitivetherapy.com](http://www.cognitivetherapy.com)
- "What is Cognitive Therapy?" R. W. Westermeyer at [www.habitsmart.com/pin.html](http://www.habitsmart.com/pin.html)
- Brief therapy: [www.brieftherapy.org.uk](http://www.brieftherapy.org.uk)



## Imperfect Access to Internal Attitudes

It is generally assumed that people have direct, accurate access to their own attitudes, evaluations, and emotions. When we ask a student how she feels about school or if she likes a certain activity, we assume that she is able to answer accurately. However, **some adolescents are not able to access their mental states easily or accurately**. To add further complications, a student's belief about an internal state is not always in sync with his behavior, even if the belief is accurate.

There are certain conditions that influence this imperfect access to internal states:

1. To reduce anxiety, fear, or threat, an adolescent might deny that the state exists (**motivated self-deception**). (E.g., "I don't have a problem.")
2. Adolescents sometimes become convinced that they feel something that they do not. The **inaccurate verbalizing** (e.g., "I hate school") may actually be independent of their actual feelings. To fit in with a certain peer group or appear "cool," a student may say something that she doesn't really feel. An adolescent might also be verbalizing with a limited vocabulary or limited understanding of the situation (e.g., "English sucks.")
3. Adolescents may have **processing or accessibility difficulties**. For example, the more processing an adolescent has to do to form an attitude, the more apt he will be to lose track of what the attitude is. Also, the more negative the attitude, the more accessible it usually is (e.g., "I used to like my teacher last year when he was my soccer coach but I'm not doing well now in his math class and he must hate me so he won't play me this year and so I won't bother working in math because he doesn't care about me anymore").

If the reasons for one's feelings are actually analyzed through **self-reflection**, the consistency or correspondence between reported feelings and behaviors may be reduced. A teacher can help a student learn to gain better access to internal feelings. In the case of motivated self-deception, a teacher can ask probing questions like "If you don't have a problem, why is it that your performance at school is not acceptable now?" A student can be asked to justify an inaccurate verbalization with a request for clarification or specification such as, "You say you hate school, but you seem to enjoy playing on the soccer team and you said that science was fun. Is it that you hate school, or is there something specific about school you don't like?" A student may need help distinguishing between feelings and thoughts. If the teacher feels that a student is resorting too often to the same vague or ambiguous descriptors (i.e., something "sucks"), a student can be asked to explain the term in other words. If a student has processing or accessibility difficulties, a teacher can help by working with the student to break down convoluted thinking (as in the soccer/math example above) into smaller steps such as "Let's try to keep math and

soccer separate for now. Why don't we talk first about your math class?"

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## Getting Started: Working With Adolescents

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Adolescents' **developmental stage** can make working with them a challenge. They may exhibit time distortion, mistrust of adults, illogic, and also may be not motivated to change. They are often under the false impression that their problems will suddenly disappear without any effort on their part. It is essential to establish a **collaborative and empathic relationship** with the student. It is this relationship that is the vehicle for change, providing a safe and caring environment for the student to begin exploring his or her faulty schemas.

Restructuring faulty cognitions of adolescents is made more difficult if they have difficulty in, or resistance to, expressing problems or lack of persistence. When dealing with adolescents, teachers have to remember that their students may not agree or recognize that there is a problem with underachievement. If the teen is not entering the intervention willingly, then there is also a motivation issue.

Another consideration when working with adolescents is the perception of an "**invisible audience**" of peers judging their performance that provokes constant anxiety. Image is everything to an adolescent, and the fear of being laughed at, embarrassed, or perceived as "uncool" can be debilitating. Adolescents are constrained by



the "invisible audience" and construct views of "appropriate" intellectual interests and achievement.

Teachers must remember that their unsolicited assistance may signal low ability to many students, as does praise for easy tasks. If a student perceives the teacher's help as a negative, then the intervention will not be beneficial.

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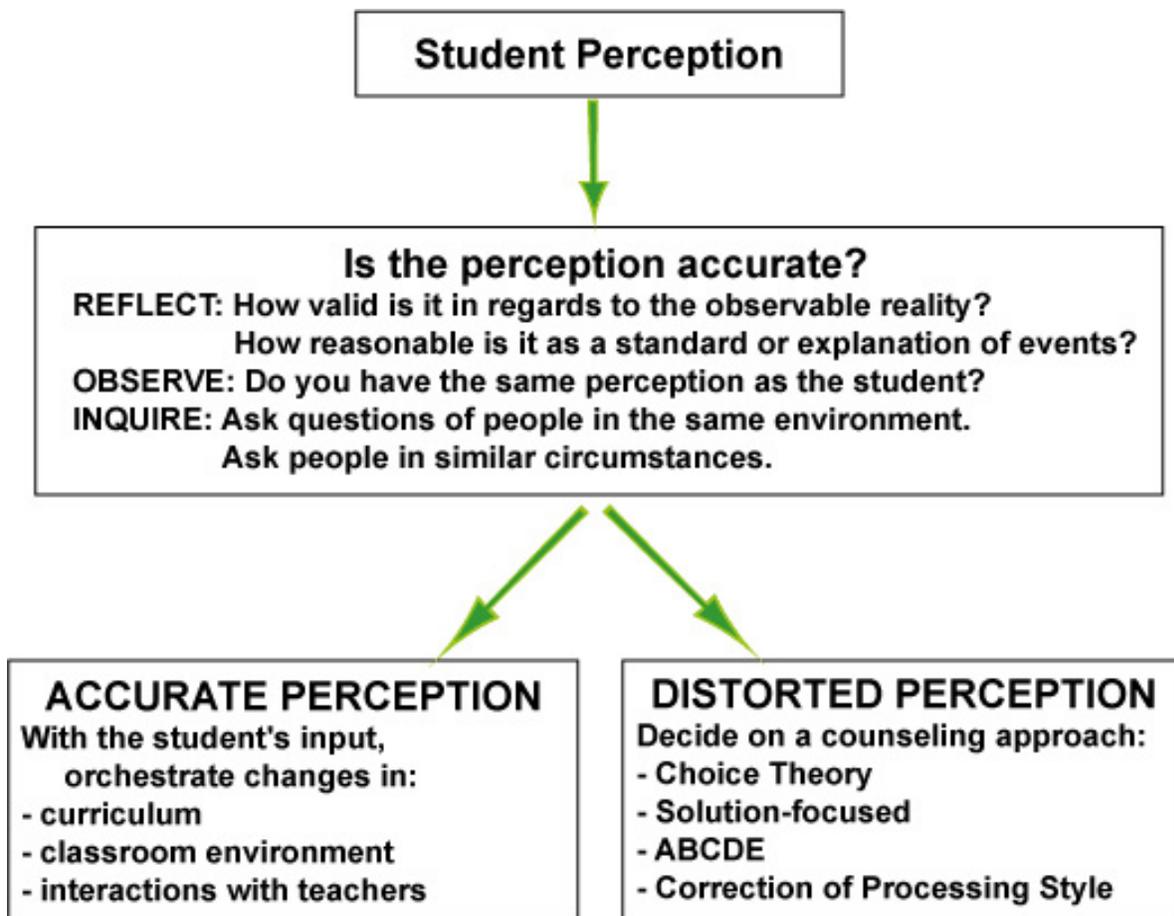
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## Getting Started: Evaluating Student Perceptions

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The implementation of this module assumes first and foremost that the student you have selected to work with is a voluntary participant who wishes to try to reverse his underachievement. When faced with any problem, academic or otherwise, a person has only three options: avoid it, learn to deal with it, or change it. If a student expresses the desire to work with you, then she is not avoiding the problem. By using the strategies in this module you can help a student learn how to better deal with the problematic situation (underachievement) and how to make changes to reduce the effects of or eliminate the problem altogether. Cognitive interventions teach good, appropriate, and/or healthy thinking skills.

The flow chart below outlines the procedures to follow to evaluate a student's perception.



## Effective Teacher-Student Interaction for Achievement

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There are many school factors that may contribute to students' underachievement, including the school size and impersonality, evaluation systems, acceptable peer social roles, grade structures, and extracurricular opportunities. Many school factors are out of a teacher's control. There are, however, controllable factors.

Interpersonal interactions between teachers and students may contribute to student underachievement. For example, if a teacher has lower expectations for, or responds negatively to, certain students, achievement by those students may be negatively affected. In middle schools, students are usually faced with larger and more complex environments than they encountered in elementary schools. There is often less emotional support from teachers, more emphasis on relative ability and competition, and decreased contact between teachers and students. It is imperative that middle school students be able to identify with their teachers and connect to the school environment. Supportive teacher-student relationships are critical for adolescents who need enduring, stable, and caring teacher support.



A teacher's behavior towards a student is a major determinant of the student's perceived control. The relationship between the actions and outcomes, or the contingency of teachers, is important to how a student performs. Clear expectations and consistent feedback tend to enhance student achievement. A students' perceptions about the involvement of teachers are also factors. Whether a student perceives the teacher to be helping or chastising affects the student's academic performance. For a gifted student, accepting unsolicited teacher assistance may be perceived as an indication of weakness or incompetence. Demonstrating a positive interest in knowing more about the student as an individual and taking his or her opinions into consideration when making decisions are important also.

Teacher morale influences student morale. Students who perceive that their teachers are satisfied with their jobs have been found to be more likely to achieve.

## Effective Educational Environments



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Students' perceptions of classroom environments influence their achievement. A match between a student's preferred classroom environment and the actual class environment may be as important to achievement as the actual nature of the classroom environment. Meeting the individual needs of students in a structured climate, with organization of student roles in the classroom, clear role expectations, and shared group-sanctioned norms have been shown to be effective factors contributing to student achievement.

An educational climate that is orderly, but not rigid with a consistent set of rules and values while still allowing for pleasure in learning is an effective environment. Establishing learning teams and changing them often and allowing students to participate in decision-making can lead to higher student morale, and thus, impact their achievement.

Thematic of interdisciplinary approaches, cross-age tutoring, opportunities for self-regulating, and grouping by topic, interest, and student choice are also conducive to achievement. Perhaps most important to students' perception that they can achieve is an environment that provides challenging, complex work while encouraging academic risks and viewing mistakes as a part of learning.

In an effective learning environment and in a supportive relationship with a concerned teacher, students who are underachieving may choose to learn to help themselves reverse the pattern and start achieving.

**Classroom Environment Checklist:** Use this short activity to do a quick check of your classroom environment. The higher the total score, the more changes you may wish to consider.

1=always  
2=most of the time  
3=sometimes  
4=occasionally  
5=never

1	2	3	4	5	My classroom is organized.
1	2	3	4	5	I teach with a variety of strategies.
1	2	3	4	5	Students know what kind of behavior I expect from them.
1	2	3	4	5	Students help make up the classroom rules.
1	2	3	4	5	Students are placed in learning teams.

- 1 2 3 4 5 Learning teams are changed often.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I try to make learning fun for the students.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I give students choices of assignments, activities, and scheduling.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I encourage students to keep track of their progress on their own.
- 1 2 3 4 5 Students are sometimes grouped by topic.
- 1 2 3 4 5 Students are sometimes grouped by interest.
- 1 2 3 4 5 The work I give students is slightly above their level.
- 1 2 3 4 5 Students are encouraged to learn from their mistakes.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I share my own mistakes with my students.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I encourage students to try harder problems once they are successful with easier ones.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I provide opportunities for my students to tutor younger students.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I find older students to tutor my students.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I make time to talk to students outside the class.
- 1 2 3 4 5 I know the interests of my students.



## Introduction to Cognitive Lessons

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As discussed earlier in this module, cognitive approaches are time-limited, short-term, goal-oriented, and collaborative. Once you are familiar with the approaches a schedule of visits with the selected student can be established. It is recommended to have three successive sessions, each 20-30 minutes in length, depending on the issue being addressed. Sessions should be spaced several days apart. Student activities and forms are provided, but should not be considered as homework assignments for the student. These activities are to be done with you as a part of the session. This part of the module involves one-on-one counseling and discussion with the student.

Lesson 1: Identifying Faulty Cognitions  
Lesson 2: Choice Theory  
Lesson 3: Solution-focused Approach  
Lesson 4: ABCDE Approach  
Lesson 5: Automatic thoughts  
Summary chart for teachers

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## Lesson 1: Identifying Faulty Cognitions



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[Click for introductory video for Lesson 1.](#)

As with any cognitive approach, the objective is to help a student gain new perspectives on the problem by being taught to recognize the **negative impact of faulty cognitions** and to replace them with more appropriate thought patterns.

**The three basic irrational beliefs** that some adolescents hold are:

1. I must perform well all the time.
2. Everyone must treat me well all the time.
3. Conditions must be favorable all the time.

Adolescents' negative and inaccurate automatic thoughts or **distorted cognitions** fall into five categories:

1. perceptions about what events occur (e.g., The teacher doesn't like me so she asks me lots of questions in class to put me on the spot.),
2. attributions about why events occur (e.g., I'm not doing as well as I could because the teacher grades too hard.),
3. expectancies or predictions of what will occur (e.g., I'll never get an A from her.),
4. assumptions about the nature of the world and correlations among events (e.g., Adults don't listen to kids.), or
5. beliefs about what "should" be (e.g., I ought to be allowed to drop math if I don't like it).

To **determine whether or not a particular cognition is faulty**, ask two questions:

1. **How valid** is the perception/attribution/etc. as a representation of an "objective" reality? For example, if the student reports that s/he is bored because the curriculum is unchallenging, and some investigation finds that the curriculum is, in fact, not suitable, then this is not a faulty perception, even if it is a contributing factor to the student's underachievement.
2. **How reasonable** is it as a standard or as an explanation for events? For example, if the student reports that nothing less than a perfect grade is acceptable, or that a teacher is "out to get him/her," one should question the reasonableness of the statement.

**Distortion is only evident when the adolescents' cognitions are inflexible, unattainable, or extreme. The counseling lessons in this module are only needed if the perceptions are inaccurate, not if they are merely negative.**

"Pinpointing Nasty Cognitions," R. W. Westermeyer at [www.habitsmart.com/pin.html](http://www.habitsmart.com/pin.html)

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## Lesson 2: Choice Theory

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*After this introduction of the theory to the student, try to use the strategies consistently in your classroom.*

According to Choice Theory, all behavior is made up of four components: acting, feeling, thinking, and physiology. **All behavior is chosen, and the only person whose behavior we can control is our own.** We only have direct control over our actions and thoughts. We can control our feelings and physiology through how we choose to act and think.

We control ourselves. None of what we do is caused by any situation or person outside of ourselves. **No thing, event, or person "makes" us do anything.** We do not do what we are told unless doing so satisfies us more than anything else we believe we can do at the time. We are responsible for fulfilling our own needs. Some of our basic needs that can be fulfilled in school are belonging, fun, and power. We behave the way we do to best satisfy our needs.

### Strategies to Integrate "Choice Theory" Into Practice

- Do not allow a student to say someone else "made" her do something or react somehow. "The teacher made me mad" is a way of saying "I am not personally responsible for what I feel, and therefore, for what I do." Instead, point out to the student that she chose to feel angry, and examine with her the reasons for the anger and her subsequent actions.
- Have a student use verbs to describe his feelings, rather than adjectives. "I am depressed about school" does not imply personal responsibility or choice. "I am depressing something" or "I am choosing to depress something" is a more accurate and responsible way to express the feeling, as it means that something can be done about the situation. Again, it is important to reiterate that a person chooses to think and react in a certain way. Help the student figure out what it is that he is depressing and point out that this is not a fixed state.

For more on William Glasser's Choice Theory:

- Books: Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom  
Choice Theory in the Classroom (see Reference section)
- [www.wglasserinst.com](http://www.wglasserinst.com)

## Lesson 3: Solution-Focused Approach

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[Click for introductory video for Lesson 3.](#)

This cognitive approach does not focus on problems, but on solutions. It is student-centered, not problem-centered, and action-oriented, with each session beginning with the question "What is your goal in coming here?" A solution-focused session acknowledges that there is a goal to be accomplished or a problem to be solved and then centers on that purpose. Listen attentively and empathically, but do not let the student get stuck talking about problems in the past or problems that are out of his control. **Good goals** are stated:

1. in the positive,
2. in the student's own words,
3. in process form, ending in -ing (What will you be doing or thinking?),
4. in the here and now (What will you be doing now or soon?),
5. as specifically as possible, and
6. in ways that are within the control of the student.

### Sample Dialogue for Setting Good Goals

Teacher (T): The first thing we need to do today is to set a goal for us to work toward. What is your goal in working with me?

Student (S): My mom says I'm "wasting my potential."

T: Sounds like you were quoting your mom. How would you describe her expression "wasting potential"?

S: Not getting good grades.

T: How is this a problem for you?

S: I don't want to be pulled from enrichment class. My friends are all there.

T: That gives us a place to start. What will you have to do so that doesn't happen?

S: I'd have to work all the time.

T: Is that possible, to work "all the time"?

S: For a while.

T: Let's try to come up with a goal that is realistic, one that you can stick to. Try to be really specific.

S: I can do better at school.

T: Okay, how will you do that?

S: By not wasting my time?

T: I don't know. How will you do that?

S: I'll act better in classes.

T: okay, let's go over what we've come up with. You want to stay in the enrichment class and act better. Is that right?

S: I guess so.

T: We have to come up with a goal that you are comfortable with and it has to be

something you can and will start doing right away.

S: I can do better in language arts class. I'm doing okay in math.

T: Great. Now, what do you mean by "doing better"?

S: Like, pay attention and not fool around.

T: Sounds like we have a good goal in the making! Let's go over what you plan to do tomorrow.

## Turning Wishes, Complaints, and Labels Into Goals

Students may need help with expressing good goals. Wishes, complaints, and labels such as "I wish everyone would lay off," "My parents are never satisfied," and "My teacher is too picky" need to be changed into goals. Listen carefully and empathically to show that you understand by rephrasing the comment and repeating it back to the student, but add a follow-up question to refocus the student on the active pursuit of change that is within his control (e.g., How is this a problem for you? How controllable is this? To what extent can you change this? What would you like to change as a result of this session? How can I help you make this change?) A good goal does not depend on someone else needing to change first.

**The focus is on what is occurring in the present, and on how to actively change it for the future.** Explore the exceptions to the problem to encourage the student to keep doing what is already working. To focus on solutions, ask questions like:

- What is working for you now? How could you do more of the same?
- What are you doing that keeps this problem going? What would you rather be doing instead of your problem?
- What would you like to try that is different from what you usually do?
- What kinds of problems have you previously solved? How?
- When you had a problem like this one before, what good solutions did you work out? or If you have never had this type of problem before, have you ever helped someone else with this type of problem?
- What changes did you make that were better than those you are making now?
- What were the times when you expected to have this problem and you did not actually have it, or you dealt well with it?
- What solutions have worked well for you, and what ones have not?
- When you stopped feeling upset/angry/frustrated/incapable, what had you done to make yourself stop?
- What interrupted your problem and made it better or tolerable?

## Reactions to the Inevitable "I Don't Know" Response

*"I don't know" is a natural for an adolescent, especially considering that the questions are new and difficult.*

- "How would your life be different if you did know?"
- Paraphrase or reword your question.
- Wait and see what happens. "I don't know" might just be a way to buy time to think of answers.
- "What would your parent/teacher/friend say about this problem/situation?" or "Guess."
- "I know it's a hard question. You don't have to answer immediately," then wait again. This indicates that you want a real answer and are willing to wait patiently.
- "Of course you don't know yet. Take your time. What do you think?"
- Use a combination of the above. After a student says "I don't know" do not respond in any way for at least 6 seconds. Any kind of movement or nod from you means it is your turn to talk. Most students will start developing an answer in 6 seconds, but if the "I don't know" is repeated, then respond with a prompt like "Suppose you did know" or "Pretend you know."

The key to a solution-focused discussion session is to **point out a student's successes and assets** by deconstructing the problem that she constructed (see Lesson 2 on Choice Theory). Show the student that she has changed in the past, so she can do it again. Willfully and actively pushing for change is going to work better than hoping for some miraculous or spontaneous change. A student must learn to blame his behaviors, not himself. A supportive adult can encourage a student to push to do something he would not normally have done. The students will need more reassurance at first that he can do better than he thinks he can and that he can change himself.

Help the student pick an important, yet not too big of a problem to solve quickly. It is important to **start with a small, manageable situation** so that the student experiences success quickly. For example, the student may wish to "do better in math." Once the student expresses a goal help her express it according to the six criteria of good goal-setting. Next, help them come up with several realistic, practical, and workable potential solutions that are possible to use right away. Evaluate the pros and cons of the solutions. Rehearse some of the strategies and likely behaviors, then choose one together to actually implement.

**Follow-up:** Did the solution work as anticipated? Why or why not? Even if the plan

did not work perfectly, reward the student for making the effort. Help the student choose another strategy to try again, or another problem.

**Classroom Strategy: Kill the "I can't-ism"**

As long as a student believes she can't change, it will be almost impossible for her to change, not because of lack of ability, but the belief that she can't. Do not allow students to use the words "I can't" as a cop-out. Model and encourage them to use alternative expressions such as "I find it difficult" or "I am having trouble with..."

For more on Solution Focused techniques:

- [www.enabling.org/ia/sft](http://www.enabling.org/ia/sft)
- "Helping that Focuses on Solutions," B. Clelland, at [hippocrates.family.med.ualberta.ca/~bill/solut1.html](http://hippocrates.family.med.ualberta.ca/~bill/solut1.html)

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## Lesson 4: ABCDE Approach to Faulty Cognitions

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[Click for introductory video for Lesson 4.](#)

According to Ellis' **Rational Emotive Behavioral Model**, a student needs to break down an experience into three areas (A, B, and C) to discover if distortions or irrational beliefs are present.

**A** is the **activating event**, experience, or adversity. The student must describe this experience in objective terms, with no views or opinions. For example, "I received a C in English on my first term report card."

**B** is the student's **belief** about what is true about this activating event (A). "I have never gotten above a C for this teacher, I am no good, I will never get above a C, I'm a failure."

**C** is the **consequence** (a feeling or behavior) that is the result of the student's interpretation of A and belief (B) about it. Students need to be taught and reminded that the consequence is a choice, and can be beneficial or not. Usually, unhealthy behaviors are responses to irrational or inaccurate beliefs/cognitions. An example of a consequence that can be destructive is to stop trying to improve the C grade, with the illogical reasoning "I should have done well but I didn't, so now everyone thinks I'm useless. I'll never be able to do English."

Once the ABCs are discovered and explored, the intervention (DE) begins.

First, **dispute (D)** or challenge the dysfunctional beliefs. Why must you be perfect? Does doing poorly on this report card, in this subject mean you are bad at everything? Does it make you totally inadequate? Where is the evidence that people think you are useless?

Next, examine **effective new philosophies, emotions, and behaviors (E)** to take action against the faulty cognitions and dysfunctional beliefs. Have the student change any "must" statements to preferences. Taking action means answering the questions from the disputing stage (D) and making changes to the beliefs (B). "There is no reason why I can't do better in English. I don't have to be great at everything. Most likely, if I keep trying, I'll succeed at this. I'd prefer to do well. Not doing well this time does not mean I can't do well the next time."

For more on Ellis' ABCDE approach, see the Albert Ellis Institute at [www.rebt.org](http://www.rebt.org)

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## Student Activity

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**Using the ABC method:** Have the student keep a thoughts and behavior diary for a set period of time, starting with a few days or a week, to record upsetting, stressful, or problematic incidents to do with achievement at school.

A - Report the activating event. Make two columns for describing it, one for "objective" observation (as if a news reporter), and the other for subjective interpretation (how the student felt).

B - Describe the unhealthy behavior or response in detail. (This assumes the student has had previous instruction about common cognitive distortions, in Lesson 3b)

C - Record the consequences of that behavior using two columns, one for short-term and the other for long-term consequences. (Be aware that **adolescents often ignore probable negative consequences of self-defeating or self-destructive behaviors.**)

Use this student record to facilitate the D and E discussion outlined below.

### Teacher strategy

#### 1. DE Follow-up (with teacher facilitator):

- Once a distorted belief is identified ("There's no point in working hard in that class," "The teacher is too hard on me"),
  - a. Have the student provide evidence for and against his/her belief.
  - b. Have the student list his/her dysfunctional behaviors exhibited in this situation (doesn't pay attention; refuses to do homework, etc.)
- Ask the student to provide an alternative interpretation for the activating event ("The teacher is trying to help me improve my grade") and alternative behaviors ("When the teacher is trying to help me, it's not a negative thing.")

#### 2. Positive Self-talk:

Once negative automatic thoughts are identified and judged as inaccurate, help the student generate a list of positive attributes to use. Have the student practice replacing the negative ones by imagining the activating event.

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## Introduction



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The implementation of this module, Student Perceptions of School Environment, requires the teacher to:

- read the entire module before working with a student
- choose a student participant with whom there is already a good rapport
- work with one student for the duration of the study
- schedule regular sessions (2-3 per week) outside of class time, with the student
- spend 20-30 minutes per session with the student
- arrange for a private meeting area for the sessions (i.e. empty classroom or office area)
- evaluate an appropriate course of action
- plan the sequence of the lessons
- complete a weekly report checklist to submit to the NRC/GT contact person

This module begins with the evaluation of a student's perceptions of the school environment. Once it has been established whether the perceptions are accurate or distorted, the next step is taken. For example, a student may perceive that a particular classroom environment is not a safe place to voice her opinions or make mistakes. This perception may prove to be totally accurate. If this is the case, then the student can be helped to learn how to deal better with this situation and the teacher may be willing to make some changes in either their interactions with the student or in the physical classroom environment. If, however, the perception that the classroom is not a safe place is unfounded, then the student can learn the necessary skills to do the cognitive work required to change the inaccurate perception. It is important that students do not fall victim to external forces. There are situations and aspects of situations that they can control, provided they have the skills to determine this. Teacher-student collaboration is key to the success of this cognitive work. This module focuses on helping a student move forward academically rather than remaining stuck in a pattern of underachievement.

Although the strategies, techniques, and activities in this module are designed for one-on-one work with a student, they are also applicable to almost any teaching situation and group size. The lessons in this module are intended to guide you through discussions with the selected student, as well as to help you reflect on classroom and school interactions and environments.

**NOTE:** *The counseling techniques and strategies in this module are designed for a classroom teacher to implement with a student who is underachieving due to specific problems with inaccurate perceptions of school situations. This module is NOT intended to replace the services of a professional school counselor if serious student issues arise during this intervention study. The teacher must use her professional judgment to assess the need for referral to a school counselor.*

## Lesson 5: Automatic Thoughts

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[Click for introductory video for Lesson 5.](#)

We all have different information processing styles, and sometimes these styles lead us to have inaccurate or distorted automatic thoughts. These are thoughts that immediately pop into our heads under certain circumstances. Common negative, unhealthy, or destructive automatic thoughts fall into three basic categories:

1. Depression: hopelessness, worthlessness, helplessness  
A person who is not clinically depressed but who is choosing to depress might say things like:
  - It's hopeless.
  - I can't do anything.
  - I'll never amount to anything.
  - There's nothing I can do to change things.
  
2. Anxiety: danger, vulnerability  
An anxious or fearful person might say:
  - I will fail for sure.
  - People will think I'm an idiot.
  - It will be awful if I don't perform well.
  
3. Anger: being treated unfairly, unreasonable obstacles, deliberate provocation  
A person who is angry might blame others or expects something by saying:
  - That person is deliberately trying to get me.
  - This is so unfair.
  - I shouldn't have to put up with this.

[Teachers' Summary Chart of Automatic Thoughts, Information Processing Styles, and Correction Strategies](#)

[More Cognitive Strategies to Change Negative Automatic Thoughts](#)

[Student Activity: Self-Monitoring of Automatic Thoughts](#)

[Student Activity: Positive Self-Reinforcement](#)

## Teachers' Summary Chart of Automatic Thoughts, Information Processing Styles, and Correction Strategies



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There are many distorted information processing styles and automatic thoughts that we can learn to recognize and then correct. This chart contains some of the most common processing styles, examples of the resulting automatic thoughts, as well as a strategy to intervene.

*(You may choose to discuss only selected information processing distortions, or may cover all of them over several sessions rather than all at once.)*

<b>Distorted Info. Processing Style</b>	<b>Automatic Thought (e.g.)</b>	<b>Correction Strategy</b>
1. Arbitrary inference: no evidence supports the conclusion, or the conclusion is contrary to the evidence	"Luck gets you into college, not good grades."	Accumulate hard evidence to test the conclusion.
2. Overgeneralization: general conclusion is drawn from a single event; jumping to conclusions	"My teachers all think I'm lazy."	Examine how much evidence supports or opposes the conclusion; have student provide alternative conclusions
3. Catastrophizing: overreaction; gross exaggeration of an event, with focus on the worst case scenario; "awfulizing"	"I know I'll fail the test so I'm not going to bother studying."	In terms of percentages, look at the odds of the worst case happening; look at past successes
4. Minimization: gross underestimation of an event; tendency to downplay a cause when other reasons are present	"My poor work habits are no big deal because the teacher doesn't check my work."	List short- and long-term consequences; how does this impact on you, regardless of your teacher?
5. Dichotomous thinking: interpreting events in absolutes, with no tolerance for uncertainty; good or bad, right or wrong, etc.; unreasonable expectations	"I'm a complete failure." "If I can't do it perfectly I'm not going to even try."	Think in percentages; acknowledge that this is all-or-none thinking; seek middle ground or "grey" areas

6. Fallacy of fairness: believing that what one wants is the only thing that is fair	"I should be able to do whatever I want in school."	Fairness is usually a disguise for personal preferences. Make specific, concrete suggestions; be willing to compromise
7. "Should" fallacies: holding inflexible personal rules and expectations; reality is inconsistent with our expectations for how it should be	"I have to get a 100% on every test."	Compare the "shoulds, oughts and musts" to your wants; recognize that the world will not always be consistent with your existing schema
8. Mind reading: without their saying so, one believes one knows exactly what people are thinking, especially with regard to oneself	"People know I should have succeeded and now they think I'll never be able to do anything."	Examine the evidence; list specific people who think this and why; how did they show it?
9. Stereotyping: superficial belief about an entire group without recognizing individual differences	"All my teachers expect me to be perfect."	Seek exceptions; discuss particulars rather than the group

**Distorted Info. Processing Style**

**Automatic Thought (e.g.)**

**Correction Strategy**

10. Selective perception: details are taken out of context; ignoring the whole picture to focus only on things of interest

"I don't have to be good at English because I'm good at computers."

Instead of focusing on the problem, shift to a plan to improve the situation.

11. Loss of perspective: salient features are ignored; mental filtering

"I can't do this math so I'll never get into a good college."

Same as above: Solution-focused approach

**Distorted Info. Processing Style**

**Automatic Thought (e.g.)**

**Correction Strategy**

<p>12. Personalization: unsupported perception that an event reflects upon oneself</p>	<p>"Teachers in this school hate losers, so I'll never do well here."</p>	<p>Examine the validity; seek evidence; <a href="#">Attribution theory</a></p>
<p>13. Emotional reasoning: perceiving affective data as fact</p>	<p>"I'm stupid if I don't know an answer."</p>	<p>Point out the difference between "objective" fact and personal emotion/feelings; <a href="#">Attribution theory</a></p>

**Distorted Info. Processing Style**

**Automatic Thought (e.g.)**

**Correction Strategy**

<p>14. Internal control fallacy: belief that one is responsible for others' problems</p>	<p>"If I don't do well at school, my parents will never be happy."</p>	<p><a href="#">Choice Theory</a>: You are only responsible for yourself.</p>
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<p>15. External control fallacy: blaming others for own problem</p>	<p>"It's not my fault I don't do well."</p>	<p><a href="#">Choice Theory</a>: No one else can "make" you do or feel anything.</p>
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<p>16. Fallacy of change: believing that another person must be pressured to change so that one can be happy.</p>	<p>"If I could get my math teacher to lay off me everything would be okay."</p>	<p><a href="#">Choice Theory</a>: Your happiness depends on changes made in yourself, not on getting others to change.</p>
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**Distorted Info. Processing Style**

**Automatic Thought (e.g.)**

**Correction Strategy**

<p>17. Ad Hominem: attacking a person rather than dealing with an issue</p>	<p>"My teacher is out to get me."</p>	<p><a href="#">ABCDE method</a></p>
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<p>18. Resistance to change: decisions are inflexible; refusal to change a behavior even if it is causing problems</p>	<p>"There's no use trying anything."</p>	<p><a href="#">ABCDE method</a></p>
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## More Cognitive Strategies to Change Negative Automatic Thoughts

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*\*Remember that changes of the "heart" often lag behind those of the "head" when adapting to a new situation. In other words, changing negative automatic thought patterns is easier said than done and requires practice.*

- Keep a daily three-column record. In the first column, record the dysfunctional automatic thought. In the next, identify the related logic error, then, in the third, write an appropriate and rational response. (Self-monitoring activity below is a variation).
- Rehearse positive self-affirmations.(e.g., I am capable of doing this. I can succeed.)
- Reframe or reable problems to view them from another perspective. For example, try to imagine how another person sees the situation. (e.g., I hate being in math class. If I were the teacher, I'd probably get angry if kids didn't pay attention to me in class.)
- Reattribute by looking for the positive in the situation.(e.g., I don't like being in language arts class, but at least my friends are with me.)
- Distract yourself by thinking of something else rather than putting yourself down. (e.g., I'll never get an A in math this year. Hey, I wonder if we have cookies for my study break!)
- Practice "thought-stopping." Every time you recognize that you are having a negative automatic thought, say "Stop." (e.g., I'll never be able to do this math problem. STOP. yes, I will.)
- "Inoculate" yourself against the stress or negative thoughts of a particular situation by imagining or planning exposure to the activating event in order to practice new thinking. (e.g., I hate it when the teacher calls on me in class and catches me off guard. If I volunteer to answer a question at the beginning of class, then I'll be ready.)
- Think of alternative explanations for what you perceive to be true in a situation. (e.g., I'll always get C's because the teacher is too picky, or maybe I'm not understanding what he wants.)
- Find contradictory evidence for what you perceive. (e.g., This teacher just doesn't like me. But, she did ask how my weekend went.)

- Every time you have a negative automatic thought or cognition that interferes with a task, replace it with a task-oriented cognition. (e.g., Replace "I can't do this homework" with "I can do the title page and the first problem.")

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## Student Activity: Self-Monitoring of Automatic Thoughts

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Make a chart with 4 columns

[see chart](#)

- a. Complete the first 3 columns.  
Event: What is happening right now, in objective terms.  
Emotions: How do you feel? Do not confuse feelings for thoughts.  
Automatic thought: What did you say in response to the event? What went through your mind?
- b. Test the 3 columns for distortions and reason. What evidence do I have to support this belief? What evidence does not support it?
- c. Brainstorm to complete the fourth column. Is there another way of wording the automatic thought? What would be a more realistic way of thinking? How can I change my belief to make it more balanced?

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## Student Activity: Positive Self-Reinforcement

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Write at least one personal and specific example that describes how, when, and with whom you are:

[see chart](#)

These are all characteristics of achievers. The way you think about yourself can contribute to your achievement in school. You have just shown yourself that you can achieve!

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## Summary of Key Points

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- Student perceptions of school events, teacher expectations, and student-teacher interactions impact their academic achievement.
- Cognitive activity influences behavior, and negative or faulty cognitions are often automatic and involuntary.
- Desired behavior change may be affected through cognitive change.
- Many students inaccurately attribute their lack of academic success to external, uncontrollable sources.
- Cognitive interventions are time-limited, short-term, structured, goal-oriented, and collaborative, making them ideal for teachers to use in their classrooms.
- Solution-focused cognitive approaches emphasize that students learn to become personally responsible for their academic success.
- Adolescents' beliefs about an internal state or feeling are not always in sync with their behavior.
- Guided self-reflection can help reduce this discrepancy.
- To evaluate if a perception is accurate, the teacher must consider whether it is valid and/or reasonable.
- Clear expectations and consistent feedback from the teacher tend to increase student achievement.
- Classroom environments that are supportive, structured, allow for student decision making, change groupings often, and provide adequate challenge tend to be more effective learning environments,
- Cognitions or perceptions are only faulty if they are inflexible, inaccurate, or extreme.
- To assume personal responsibility, a student must acknowledge that he chooses to react or behave in a certain manner, that no one can "make" him do or feel anything.

## Weekly Report Checklist

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Please keep a daily record of which activities you do, when, and for how long or how often. This checklist will help you self-monitor and will help us collect some necessary data.

E.g.

ACTIVITY	M	TU	W	TH	F
Provided solicited assistance in class	twice		once		
Introduced Choice Theory		15 min.			

[Activity Checklist](#)



ACTIVITY	M	TU	W	TH	F
<u>Classroom</u>					
Relayed explicit, clear, and reasonable expectations					
Provided constructive feedback on academic performance					
Provided solicited assistance					
Demonstrated positive interest in knowing the student as an individual					
Considered student opinions in decision making					
Demonstrated personal job satisfaction					
Explained clearly the students' role(s) in the classroom					
Grouped students into learning teams					
Grouped students by interest					
Gave students choice of assignments					
Gave students choice of activities					
Gave students choice in scheduling the class time					
Shared a mistake					
Arranged for an older student to tutor the student participant					
Talked to the student participant outside of class time, about his/her personal interests					

ACTIVITY	M	TU	W	TH	F
<u>Lesson 1</u>					
Defined and explained concept of faulty or distorted cognitions					
Discussed categories of distorted cognitions					
Evaluated a particular cognition for validity and reasonableness					

ACTIVITY	M	TU	W	TH	F
<u>Lesson 2</u>					
Introduced Choice Theory					
Worked with student to describe feelings with verbs rather than adjectives					
Discussed particular feeling and student's choice of resulting behavior					
Introduced criteria for good goals					

ACTIVITY	M	TU	W	TH	F
<u>Lesson 3</u>					
Introduced criteria for good goals					
Discussed student's assets and previous successes					
Worked with student to set good goal(s)					
Worked on turning wishes and complaints into goals					
Met for follow-up session to analyze progress toward goal					
Modeled alternative expressions for "I can't"					
Practiced getting past student's "I don't know" response					

ACTIVITY	M	TU	W	TH	F
<u>Lesson 4</u>					
Discussed with student how to keep the thoughts and behavior diary					
Helped student break down a problematic school incident into ABC					
Disputed or challenged the dysfunctional beliefs of the ABC					
Examined possible changes student might make to his/her beliefs					
Helped generate ideas for action that the student agreed to implement					
Facilitated the generation of a list of positive student attributes					
Facilitated student practice of the ABCDE model					

ACTIVITY	M	TU	W	TH	F
<u>Lesson 5</u>					
Explained concept of negative or destructive automatic thoughts					
Explained how to complete the self-monitoring of automatic thinking worksheet					
Met to discuss the automatic thinking worksheet					
Worked on correcting specific information processing distortion (please also note which ones)					
Explained possible cognitive strategies to change negative automatic thinking					
Completed positive self-reinforcement activity					
Facilitated practice of self-reinforcement					

## References

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## On-line Resources

<http://mentalhelp.net/psyhelp/chap4/chap4k.htm>

[ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/hstein](http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/hstein)

[www.as.wvu.edu/~sbb/comm221/chapters/attrib.htm](http://www.as.wvu.edu/~sbb/comm221/chapters/attrib.htm)

[www.beckinstitute.org](http://www.beckinstitute.org)

[www.brieftherapy.org.uk](http://www.brieftherapy.org.uk)

[www.cognitivetherapy.com](http://www.cognitivetherapy.com)

[www.enabling.org/ia/sft](http://www.enabling.org/ia/sft)

[www.habitsmart.com/pin.html](http://www.habitsmart.com/pin.html)

[www.wglasserinst.com](http://www.wglasserinst.com)

[www.rebt.org](http://www.rebt.org)

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## **For all course pages to print correctly please follow these steps:**

### **For Microsoft Internet Explorer:**

IE typically is not set to print background color or images, including table cell colors. To get the table cells colored backgrounds and images to print, click on the browser's Tools menu. Select Internet Options, then click on the Advanced tab. Scroll down to find the Printing heading and check the box called Print Background Colors and Images. This setting affects both page backgrounds and table cell backgrounds.

### **For Netscape Navigator:**

Netscape seems to always print colored table cells either with colors or shading, depending on your printer. But you can separately control whether it will print the page background color or image. Click on the File menu, then select Page Setup, and then in the Page Options section, check Print Backgrounds to include the page background in your printout.