

THE TYRANNY OF SHOULD, OUGHTS & MUSTS

“I must be perfect and never make a mistake. I should always be in control. I must succeed. I can’t stand failure. I should always please and gain the approval of others. Rejection is horrible. Life must be fair. Others should give me my own way. I must be right. I must win. Others ought to appreciate the things I do for them. Life should be easy.”

We can torture ourselves and others with a number of rigid *shoulds, oughts and musts*. These ironclad convictions can produce guilt, shame and other unpleasant emotions when we fail to live up to them. They can injure our self-esteem. These inflexible beliefs can leave us angry when others fail to meet our demands. They can injure our relationships.

These convictions can be hard to eliminate for several reasons. Firstly, because they have worked for us to some degree in the past. In times of stress they have helped us to survive. Secondly, they can be hard to eradicate because we may not even be aware of their presence and the influence they have on us. Due to frequent and long-term repetition they have become part of our private logic and automatic thinking. How can we deal with these tyrants?

1. Identify the event – What happened, when, where, who?
2. How did you feel?
3. What were your automatic thoughts just before and during the unpleasant feelings – in particular, what were the *shoulds, oughts or musts* you were repeating to yourself?
4. Evaluate and challenge these convictions with any of the following questions:
 - How is this conviction affecting my feelings, behavior and movement towards my goals?

- What is this conviction costing me? Do I want to continue paying it?
 - Is this conviction working for me any longer?
 - Is this conviction helping me? Does it promote my wellbeing?
 - How is this conviction hurting me?
 - What effect is this conviction having on those around me?
 - What is this conviction costing those around me?
 - What might be the consequences of continuing to hold this conviction?
 - Is the conviction accurate or realistic? What evidence exists for it?
5. Write out more healthier and balanced convictions and rules. Healthy convictions and rules are flexible (instead of rigid), personally owned (instead unquestioningly adopted from others, e.g. parents), realistic— leading to behavior with positive outcomes (instead of unrealistic – leading to behavior with negative outcomes), and life-enhancing (instead of life-restricting). When writing avoid words like *should, ought, must, all, always, never, totally, perfect*. Instead, use phrases such as *I'd like, I'd prefer, or I want to*.
6. Then, evaluate your revised convictions by asking “What are the short-term, long-term, effects on you and others involved?” You could also ask any of the questions listed above under #4.

Adapted from “Thoughts & Feelings” by McKay, Davis & Fanning
And “Self-Esteem” by McKay & Fanning