

ALL ABOUT SHOULD STATEMENTS

"Should" happens quite often when we have acted in a manner that we later evaluate as being wrong or somehow negative. Whether it is snapping at our kids when they are too loud, or cursing out the driver that cuts you off, or anything else that we would not normally do when calm and rational for that matter, we may see negative behavior as saying something negative about ourselves as a human. This holds especially true for people who already tend to think negatively about themselves. When we beat ourselves up for what we have done by saying we "should have acted differently" we are "SHOULDING ON OURSELVES" which is basically the same thing as taking a giant negative mental "s*&t" of self-demeaning negative thoughts on our already sensitive self concepts.

"Should" like s*&t occurs in different quantities for different people. However, "should" grows the most when we are under great deals of stress and experiencing feelings of not being in control. When we experience these internal states, we are also at much higher risk to act impulsively as a result of being so emotionally on-edge (this is something that is happening a lot right now in our world). We might yell at someone or cut someone off whilst driving or over react in general. All of these impulsive actions (plus many others) are basically the equivalent of giving ourselves a GIANT high-fiber dose equivalent for massive 'SHOULDING'. We regret our actions and often experience shame about how we "should" have acted differently; "I should not have yelled at my kids"; "I should not have cut the other driver off"; "I should not have yelled at the bus driver" and so on. It gets worse the more the "should" keeps flowing in our minds and we can be setting ourselves up for further emotional and mental dis-regulation, which may lead to another impulsive outburst that will start the "should" cycle all over again. So what do we do?

It takes more than a witty poster to stop "shoulding" on yourself. Please note that all people are impacted by their own "shoulds" and those of people close to them, especially caregivers. It is very important to remember that children and individuals with developmental diagnoses are especially susceptible to impulsive behavior due in part to the nature of the biological impacts of their diagnoses/age. Parents need to be aware of how they talk with their children about their negative behavior by avoiding "should" when reprimanding or using experiences as teachable moments. Doing so is critical to remaining supportive and empathic, while also keeping shame away from infecting the discussion as "should" often is used in conjunction with statement of values and beliefs of what is good and appropriate.

You, the parent, can model the following suggestions for your child when you experience your own "should" moments. Doing so teaches your child how they can handle their own "should" while allowing you to remain a concrete example of a real human who experiences moments of negative self-appraisal.

Practice self-forgiveness: Tell yourself you understand the action was not appropriate and yet it was a natural, human response. You are human and you make mistakes!

Practice acceptance: Ok, it happened, you did something and you are "shoulding". "Shoulding" won't let you rewind to before the inappropriate behavior. We don't have to like what we did and NOW it is time to start redirecting to self-forgiveness and self-validation so we stop the flow of "should".

Validate your feelings: It is ALWAYS OK to experience whatever feelings you have even when you act out. This does NOT mean that your feelings justify your behavior. For example "I was really angry when that other boy called me dumb. I felt attacked"

YOU ARE NOT YOUR BEHAVIOR! Just because your behavior is inappropriate, you are not a bad person or have something horribly wrong with you. For example, an adult who yells at someone who cuts them in line is not necessarily an "angry person".

Watch out for "should" and values statements: Often times we "should" on ourselves when our behavior contradicts a value or belief that is important to us. For example "I should not have cut the other driver off because that was rude and not something people do". We need to be careful not to pair these together because even though we did not say that cutting someone off was bad, it is implied. Kids are very good at picking up on these kinds of statements so its important to avoid this "criticism trap".

Thank the "shoulding" incident: This sounds odd, but when we thank the incident we can give ourselves permission to find a learning opportunity, which allows us to get rid of the power of the "should" by turning it into a constructive rather than destructive experience. For example "thank you for the opportunity to learn that I still want to work on not yelling at people who are disrespectful" or "thank you incident because I learned more about how much stress I can handle before I explode. I want to work on increasing that tolerance".

Find the positive: What went right? Believe it or not in every negative incident, there is something we did right and it deserves notice. This does not mean that our behavior automatically is excusable and alright, more so we are taking note of where we started to experience functional decline so we can work on improvements for next time. For example "I did a really good job of yelling at that other kid; I would have hit him if this had happened a while ago".

"Should" happens: We are all human and all humans will "should" from time to time. We can practice not "shoulding" on ourselves, yet does it really make sense to "should" on ourselves for "shoulding" by saying we "shouldn't should on ourselves"? That's like saying you can't take a s*&t if you have to. This is a good time to practice acceptance of the "should" and self-forgiveness.

"Should replacement therapy": Replace "should with "want". We can remove the negative aspects of values associations by taking ownership of our behaviors that we have and will do whether negative or positive. When we take ownership, we can successfully remove that negative self-harming propaganda telling us what a screw-up we are and then turn the experience into one of learning. For example instead of "I should really learn how to manage my anger around others" try "I want to learn how to manage my anger around others". Replace "should with "want".