

## The Worlds of Is and Should

Look around at the world you live in. It's hard to imagine that somewhere there might be a planet just like this one. But perhaps there is. And perhaps that planet is called *Should*, and on it everything happens the way it should happen. Life is fair on that planet. Debts are repaid. Affection is returned. Hard work is rewarded. The good prosper.

Then there is the planet we are standing on right now. This one is called *Is*. Here things are the way they are. Life isn't always fair. Debts aren't always repaid. Affection isn't always returned. Hard work isn't always rewarded. The good do not always prosper.

Not much of a comparison, is it? The world of *Should* seems much more attractive. We know what the planet *Should* is like, because we all have a sense of how things *should* go. In fact, all of us, at times in our lives, pretend that we are in a world where things happen the way they *should* happen. We have unrealistic expectations of ourselves, other people, and the world around us. We try to ignore the fact that here in the world of *Is* things often work out differently. When the reality of life breaks in on us, and things do not go the way they should, we experience surprise, sadness, and anger.

Albert Ellis has probably done more than anyone else to identify the "shoulds" that we use to sabotage our lives. Identifying our own shoulds can help us catch them in action, and remind ourselves that we live on planet Earth, the world of *Is*, and that when we talk about *should* we are discussing a world to which we have never been and will never go. Below you will find a list of common shoulds, each preceded by a space for a check mark if it's one of yours.

\_\_\_\_\_ I should be absolutely competent and flawless in all I undertake.

\_\_\_\_\_ I should achieve as much as my mother/father/sibling/mentor/coworker/friend has achieved.

\_\_\_\_\_ I should do everything I can to please other people, otherwise they will reject me.

\_\_\_\_\_ Other people should love and accept me completely.

\_\_\_\_\_ Things should be exactly the way I would like them to be; and until they are I can never be happy.

\_\_\_\_\_ By this time in my life I should (be earning more money / have a better home / be married / be past my depression).

Are there other “shoulds” that you place on yourself? What are they?

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Shoulds can have powerful negative effects on our lives:

1. When directed toward ourselves they impose a burden of guilt and pressure. *“I should really be doing this and I’m not.”* Many of us feel quite enough guilt and pressure.
2. When directed toward others they cause us to feel anger and resentment. *“He should be doing that and he’s not, the rat.”* This seldom leads to a positive outcome.
3. They breed dissatisfaction with our lives by encouraging us to focus on what we don’t have. *“The weather should be better this time of year.”*

How can we handle shoulds? There are three basic strategies.

### **Reassess your standards**

Most shoulds are unreasonable. *“I should be flawless.” “She should consider what I want and agree with me.”* Reassessing your standards does not mean abandoning them. You can still strive for excellence, but you don’t have to see yourself as inadequate if you don’t always achieve it. *“I’ll do my best.” “I would like it if she went along with my ideas some of the time.”*

Take one of your own “shoulds” and reword it to say something more reasonable. Remove the words “should” and “must”.

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### **Emphasize your choice**

If we abandon our shoulds, won’t we just sit around doing nothing? What will we use to motivate ourselves? Answer: Personal choice.

Try saying the following out loud: *“I really should get out of bed and get to work.”* Feel the guilt? The pressure?

Try this instead: *"I've decided to get out of bed and get to work."* Feel any different? This statement is more real: it really is your action, so it really is a choice you are making. You've evaluated the consequences of getting out of bed (going to work) and staying in bed (potential trouble from work), and you've chosen the best option available. This kind of statement emphasizes your own role, your choice, and your ultimate control. You didn't *really* have to get out of bed. You chose to do so.

Here are a few examples:

*"I should have sent off this order before now"* becomes *"I'm choosing to send this order today."*

*"I should be neater"* becomes *"I've decided to spend half an hour tidying up."*

Sometimes when you reassess the *should* you make a different choice.

*"Instead of sitting here reading this book, I should be cleaning up the garden"* becomes *"The garden can wait. Right now I've decided that reading this book is a higher priority."*

In the space below, reword one of your own *shoulds* to emphasize your personal choice.

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### **Release others from your *shoulds***

Some of our *shoulds* involve others.

*"He should know by now how I take my tea."*

*"She should be more considerate when I'm trying to sleep."*

Recognize that no one has to live by our standards, and they are not evil if they have standards different from ours. Rather than making ourselves miserable dwelling on their failings, we can consciously release them to live their own lives and make their own standards. *"If I don't like the tea, I can make it myself."*

This doesn't mean abandoning all input, however. You may have to negotiate agreement if you live together, if you are raising a child, or if you are working together on a project. If so, straightforward assertiveness skills are likely to work better than the guilt-inducing tactic of "*shoulds*."

If you leave them unexpressed (*"He should be able to type faster than that!"*), shoulds serve only to make us angry and frustrated.

If we express them as a guilt-inducing strategy (*"You should have filed that before now"*), shoulds often breed anger and resentment in others.

Assertive communication expresses your desires and invites a dialog toward a resolution. *"Patient records have to be filed and locked away by the end of the day. How could we make sure that happens?"*

Have you identified any shoulds involving other people (he should, she should) which you could release or reduce? Try to reword one of your shoulds as a more reasonable position.

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