

Learning Your “ABCs”: 3 Steps to Spiritual Growth

By Laura Allan, MA, CPC

Live. Learn. Grow.

These aren't just words but a focused, purposeful attitude to embrace as you search for spiritual growth and reach the goal of living a life of intention – no matter the suffering or challenges you're currently facing.

A Search for Meaning

“Maybe there's a reason that all this happened; maybe it'll become clearer to me than it is right now.”



The concern and worry evident in Aimee's eyes, belies her words of reassurance, spoken mainly as a means of calming herself rather than those around her. In reality, she can feel the rising panic from the pit of her stomach, almost like the rise of mercury through a thermometer, as it snakes up her chest and lodges in her throat.

Aimee's husband Joe is reaching a dreaded milestone: 18 months after becoming unemployed, they're now facing the loss of their healthcare – a particularly frightening situation given the health of one of their sons.

Aimee and Joe have been married for 15 years and were not only envisioning their ideal life, but living it, as were many of their colleagues and friends. They had achieved what every middle class American considered success: four lovely children, a home in a very nice suburb, two cars, and of course, two high paying jobs.

As they face a serious turn in their circumstances, the couple searches for meaning in what has befallen them – for the “reason” to become clear.

But perhaps like most of us, they're too close to the problem to take a rational view of what's happened and *that* may be keeping them in the depth of their suffering even longer.

The good news is that there's a solution to be had, in as little as three steps, to changing their outlook, and optimally, their situation!

Let me share these three steps with you:

Step 1: Anticipate Personal Growth When Change is Inevitable

Often personal growth comes as the result of tremendous tumult in our lives. It's inevitable because things cannot – and will not – continue as they were, no matter how much we wish it to be so.

Severe stress like that which Aimee and Joe are experiencing due to job loss, medical emergencies, relationships or any of the other stressors we all experience at one time or another, make change inevitable.

Through that change, personal growth can result, if we are open, willing and aware.

Step 2: Embrace Positive Thinking When Negative No Longer Works

As Aimee so aptly states above, most of us are incurable optimists, perhaps only explainable as the “human spirit”.

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There must be a “reason” for our suffering, most of us tell ourselves. We simply don’t know what it is – yet.

We continue our search for meaning, much like Victor E. Frankl, a Nazi prison camp survivor, relates in his book “Man’s Search for Meaning”.

In this classic he revealed that, when faced with inconceivable suffering, many of those in the camp realized that although their physical freedom had been ripped from them, their spiritual freedom remained.

Step 3: Learn Your “ABCs” for True Insight and Personal Growth

When in the midst of suffering we ask ourselves, “What am I supposed to *learn* from this experience? What truly will give my life meaning and purpose when I’m on the other side of this suffering?”

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy provides us with a very relatable approach that’s easy to use when going through change. Known as the “ABC” approach its structure is as follows:

- “**A**” stands for **Activating Event**; this is the immediate event that you’ve experienced along with your interpretation of what happened.
- “**B**” stands for your **Beliefs** about the event which can be rational or irrational; and
- “**C**” stands for the **Consequences** which are the behaviors, thoughts and emotions that result; either negative or positive.

As you can imagine, we sometimes distort the truth of what we tell ourselves about a particular event and this often leads to self-limiting behaviors. How?

Well, distortions in thinking can occur in a number of different ways, like:

1. Black and white thinking; also known as “either/or” thinking
2. Making unfair comparisons; most typically negative
3. Filtering in which we concentrate on the negative and ignore the positive
4. Personalizing in which we blame ourselves for the event
5. Mind reading in which we assume we know what others think (and it’s most negative!)
6. Catastrophising in which we imagine the worst case scenario
7. Over generalizing which is when we use words like “always” or “never”
8. Confusing fact and feeling

Using the ABC Approach to Create Lasting Change

It’s important to relate the “ABC Model” to real circumstances, so let’s take a look at our couple, Aimee and Joe. As time stretches further from the date when he was laid off, he begins feeling discouraged.

Even though he has submitted well over 200 resumes, few employers have called Joe back and he’s had no interviews. His frustration is mounting, as is Aimee’s, which is beginning to affect their relationship.

So, let’s take a look at how Joe might gain better insight by utilizing the “ABC” approach – and possibly find fresh solutions to his job search:

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1. We'll use the act of Joe sending out his resume to yet another employer as the **Activating Event**.
2. Due to experiencing little feedback or interest from employers, his **Beliefs** are in danger of becoming distorted as he:
 - Begins making unfair comparisons between his qualifications and those of other job seekers, feeling as if he's not as qualified.
 - Personalizes his failure to obtain a job offer and begins blaming himself.
 - Engages in mind reading what others are thinking, like his wife feeling he's not working hard enough to find a job or the employer feeling he's not very highly qualified.
 - Engages in catastrophe thinking in which he images the worst case scenario and fears he'll never work again.
3. Finally he must learn to take a more measured look at the **Consequences** of these thoughts and his resulting behaviors to gain true insight.

You can learn to use the “ABC” approach to relate to your situation:

1. When the **Activating Event** occurs, write down what happened and the feelings and thoughts that came up for you.
2. Now uncover your **Beliefs** about what happened by writing down the actual thoughts that went through your head; and finally
3. Write down the **Consequences** of those beliefs; both your actions (what you did) and your emotions (what you felt).

As you can see, the beginning of any period of growth often begins with suffering and a true search for insight into our feelings, thoughts, and actions.

The good news is that uncovering this information allows you the opportunity to develop, upon reflection of what you learn through this approach, a more balanced, reasonable view of the events that occur in your life.

Leaving yourself open to what can be learned from the suffering that occurs in your life, allows for the possibility of what comes next.

Employing the “ABC” approach you'll be able to better ascertain the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that may be keeping you from more significant personal growth and help you learn, love, and grow!

For more information, take a look at some of the following authors in the area of change and personal growth: [David Burns](#), [Louise Hay](#), [Will Bowen](#), [Wayne Dyer](#), [Christiane Northrup](#), [M. Scott Peck](#), and [Harriett Lerner](#).

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Laura Allan is a Registered Counselor and Certified Professional Coach. She has an M.A. degree in Applied Behavioral Science with concentration in Systems Counseling from Bastyr University. She also has a B.S. degree from Washington State University and an M.S. from Seattle University. She has additional specialized training in working with couples and eating disorders. You may visit her website at www.LauraAllanCounseling.com.