Should Statements

Long Version

So, what's the big deal about the word "should??" It becomes a problem when we allow it to make us feel bad. I hope to shed some light on how "shoulds" work and to give ideas for determining when a "should" is helping you, hurting you, or simply being itself!

From, Lexi

What is a "Should Statement?"

Note: For the sake of this handout, I explore the ways we use "should" toward ourselves (although they can also be used toward or about other people).

1. "Should statements" are an example of a cognitive (thought) distortion. A cognitive distortion is a type of thinking that is faulty or inaccurate. You could describe such thoughts as being biased, filtered, or skewed. They typically do not represent fact. In addition, distortions often have unhealthy, unreasonable, and unkind messages underneath.
2. "Should statements" can refer to anything I do, say, think, or feel.
3. Where did our "shoulds" come from? We weren't born thinking them. Rather, we learned them along the way as we grew up around many different sources of information and influences (e.g., family, friends, school, society, community, media, spiritual beliefs, etc.).
4. The thoughts we have about a particular "should statement" determine how we feel, and this is unique to each of us. You and I might use the exact same "should" and have it mean completely different things depending on the context and on our personal interpretation.
5. Notice that there are "good shoulds."
    a. They have a positive emotional tone.
    b. Often, they are a way to say, "I want to, I would like to, it would feel good to."
    c. We know we can choose whether to act on them.

        "I should get an ice cream cone!"

        (I want to because it sounds yummy.)
6. There are also "neutral shoulds."
    a. They don't have a particular emotional tone or sense of attachment.
    b. They represent a statement of fact or an observation.
    c. We know we can choose whether to act on them.

        "I should take the trash out."

        (I see that tomorrow is garbage day.)

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When Do "Should Statements" Become a Problem?

1. "Should statements" become problematic when they cause harm, meaning when they contribute to unhealthy thoughts and feelings (i.e., unfair, cruel, harsh, punitive). Simply put, they become a reason to "beat ourselves up" or to feel like "a bad person."
2. The "should statements" we are targeting could be called "bad shoulds."
    a. They have a negative emotional tone.
    b. They represent a distorted thought. (See previous section #1)
    c. We feel as if we have no choice whether to act on them or to believe them.

        "I should do the dishes."

        (I have to do the dishes right now. If I don't, I'm lazy and irresponsible.)
3. Watch out for other words that act like "bad shoulds" in disguise. Examples of this are: "Supposed to, have to, ought to, got to, and must."
4. Also look for contractions: Should've (should have) and shouldn't (should not).
5. Sometimes "should statements" present in a non-specific way:
    a. "I should be doing/saying/thinking/feeling something other than what I am right now."
    b. "I shouldn't be doing/saying/thinking/feeling this right now."
    c. This can create a sense of unease, anxiety, or edginess even though a particular "should statement" hasn't been identified.
6. "Should statements" frequently have underlying messages or "subtext" that make us feel bad about ourselves and that include a value judgment. One way to discover the negative messages underneath is to use words that bring out the next thought. For example:
    a. "I should do the dishes." (If I don't, I MUST BE… Lazy, dirty, irresponsible, useless, etc.)
    b. "I should say 'yes' to this invitation." (If I don't, THAT MEANS… I'm a bad friend, I'm selfish, I'm inconsiderate, I'm rude, etc.)
    c. "I should've been able to think of a solution." (I didn't, THEREFORE… I'm an idiot, I can't do anything right, I'll never be successful, I'm incompetent, etc.)
    d. "I shouldn't be feeling anxious right now." (Since I am, IT PROVES THAT…I'm weak, I'm a coward, I can't cope, There's something wrong with me, etc.)
7. As demonstrated in #6, "bad shoulds" become harsh motivators that serve to "keep us in line" and make sure we do the "right" thing. It might feel like the "should" must be obeyed, "or else!" Examples of negative motivation include:
    a. Self-inflicted intimidation, bullying, name-calling, meanness, etc.
    b. Fear of feeling self-conscious, embarrassed, guilty, ashamed, worthless, cowardly, etc.

   c. Fear of being scolded, punished, judged, insulted, belittled, labeled, etc. (by ourselves or by someone else)
   d. Fear of being seen as lazy, deficient, inadequate, useless, disrespectful, irresponsible, incompetent, untrustworthy, defiant, etc. (by ourselves or by someone else)

8. "Should statements" can create a feeling of urgency and pressure that may not be accurate.
   a. We might think: "If it's not done now, ASAP, or in a certain way, something bad will happen… or if I don't do it, that will mean I'm a bad person."
   b. These statements trick us into thinking we don't have choices about if, when, and how to do something.
   c. Granted, there are clearly things that *are* emergent, urgent, require immediate attention, or need to be done in an exact way. However, often things may *seem* urgent but will not have dire consequences if they're not done immediately or in a specific way.
9. Sometimes "should statements" take other people's feelings and needs into account more than our own. A "should" could cause us to override our own preferences to avoid hurting, offending, angering, confusing, etc. someone else. In the "invitation" example above (#6b), I might force myself to go to the event for fear of offending my friend versus allowing myself to stay home if I truly don't want to. The motivation here becomes guilt and obligation (yuck!).

Positive Mindset / Tools

1. Who gets to decide what a person should or shouldn't do, say, think, or feel? I suggest that we all get to decide for ourselves, and we can choose which factors, sources, influences, information, beliefs, and values we take into consideration.
2. Don't feel as if you have to attack every single "should" that comes up or that you must "never" use that word. We're targeting the ones that make us feel bad.
3. It may sound obvious, but the first step in changing "should statements" is to **be aware** of when they happen.
   a. Reading this handout will hopefully help you "hear" these types of thoughts when you think or speak them (or when they are imposed on you by others).
   b. In addition to the base word "should," remember the variations:
      i. "Shouldn't" and "should've"
      ii. "Supposed to, have to, ought to, got to, and must"
   c. You might consider having a trusted person cue you in (kindly!) when they hear you using the word "should" or any of its close cousins.

   d. For validation, try listening to people around you to see how often these words come up. You may be surprised!

4. **Set an intention** about "should statements," and remind yourself of that intention whenever they appear. For example, "I'd like to stop using 'should' to feel bad about myself. I want to remember that I have choices when I hear the word 'should.' Just because there's a 'should' doesn't mean this is an emergency. I will never use 'should' as a weapon."

5. **Develop a stopping mechanism**. This is something you can do, say, or think to interrupt, pause, or stop a negative "should statement" so that you can analyze and/or change it.
   a. Do something different with your body (e.g., sit down, stand up, close your eyes, shake your head, clap your hands, snap your fingers, touch something nearby).
   b. Say or think a word (e.g., "stop," "wait," "pause," "hold on," "time out," "warning!").
   c. Picture something in your mind. For example, a stop sign or red traffic light, a car hitting the brakes, someone holding up a hand… or "hear" someone asking you to stop.

6. **Select supportive, rational thoughts** to challenge the negative ones. This is also known as "thought countering." Continuing the examples listed in #6 of the previous section:
   a. "I should do the dishes." (Just because I don't do them now doesn't mean I'm lazy. It's okay for me to do things differently than other people. The world will not end if the dishes don't get done tonight.)
   b. "I should say 'yes' to this invitation." (I don't have to accept every invitation I get. It's healthy for me to prioritize my own needs. If I say "no," it doesn't mean my friend will hate me. I trust that she would want me to do what's best for me.)
   c. "I should've thought of a solution." (Nobody's perfect. Being stumped by a problem doesn't mean I'm stupid. I've solved other problems before, and I'm proud of that.)
   d. "I shouldn't be feeling anxious right now." (Most people feel anxious once in a while! There's no need to feel ashamed for being human. I can get through this.)

7. **Ask different questions**. Asking different questions gives us an opportunity to check in with ourselves about what we really want or need in the moment.
   a. "What *should* I be doing right now," becomes: "What *could* I do right now? What do I *want* to do? What would *feel best* to me in this moment?" "What do I *need* right now?"
   b. These questions can help us weed out the "bad shoulds" that don't truly have to be followed right now (or at all). "I *could* do the dishes, but there's no harm in letting them sit. I *don't want* to do any chores right now. It *feels best* to relax. I *need* to rest."

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8. **Go with the "should" when it serves you**. Plot twist: We can choose to proceed with a "should" if it benefits us (just remember to leave out the "feeling bad" part!).
    a. For example, "I *could* do the dishes (even though I don't really want to) because it will *feel good* to see an empty sink, plus my mom/partner/roommate won't complain or call me lazy (bonus!)." This is an example of positive motivation from a place of empowerment versus doing something because I felt guilty, scared, or intimidated.
    b. Similarly, I've heard people say, "If I do it, my future self will thank me!" I like that statement because it reinforces the fact that we chose the action that best served us, even if doing it felt unpleasant at the time.

9. Similar to #8, notice when a "should" helps you **identify an unmet need**. For example, "I should take a nap (because I'm tired)." "I should ask for help (because I'm feeling stressed)."

10. **Allow for delayed action**. Practice identifying which "shoulds" can be done at a later date or time without harmful consequences. For example:
    a. "I'm going to do the dishes tomorrow since I really want to sit down." (I may be uncomfortable knowing they're dirty, but I prioritize myself by resting. No one will be hurt if I don't do them right now. There are other dishes we can use for tonight.)
    b. "My work is due next week, so I don't have to kill myself to get it done now." (I can pace myself and still get it in on time without feeling overly stressed. I won't be fired for not doing it tonight or even tomorrow. I'll do a better job if I'm not rushed or tired.)
    c. "The trash doesn't have to be taken out right this minute." (There's nothing dangerous in it. It's doesn't stink, and the truck doesn't come until tomorrow. I can do it after dinner.)

11. Practice identifying when you can **do a "should" in a different way**. For example:
    a. *Break the task down* into smaller parts. (e.g., "Instead of washing all of the dishes, I'll do the silverware now and do the rest tomorrow." "I'll write one chapter versus finishing the whole paper in one sitting." "I'll go to my friend's party but will only stay an hour.")
    b. *Set a reasonable timeline* versus doing it immediately. (e.g., "I'll start working in 20 minutes." "I'll do it right after lunch or first thing tomorrow.")
    c. Allow yourself to *meet minimum acceptable standards* for the task at hand, meaning make it "good enough for now," versus expecting or demanding perfection.
    d. *Ask someone for help* with all or part of the task.

12. When deciding whether you "should" or "shouldn't" behave, speak, think, or feel a certain way, make sure you do so on your **own terms and conditions**. For example:
    a. "I'm doing (or not doing) this because I want to and for my own reasons."
    b. "This is what works best for my life and my schedule."

c. "I choose not to care what others may think of me as a result."
d. "I only do, say, and think things that fit with my personal value system."
e. "I'm delaying this action because it's what's healthiest for me right now."

13. When hearing a "should" that feels like a "have to right now," you can **figure out the urgency** by working your way down from most serious to least serious scenarios. For example:
    a. Is there a true life-threatening situation? Is someone injured or bleeding? Is something on fire that shouldn't be? **ACT NOW**.
    b. Do I need to get to work, school, job interview? Do I need to pick up my child from school? Do I need to pay a bill that is due today? **ACT PROMPTLY**.
    c. Do I need to finish my report that is due in a few days? Do I need to pay a bill that is due next week? Is the garbage truck coming down the street? **BE FLEXIBLE**.
14. **Being flexible** means making the best-feeling choice about when or how to do something when it is not an "act now or act promptly" scenario.
    a. If you feel better doing something ahead of time, do it!
    b. If you prefer to do something *now* without bullying or convincing yourself to do it a certain way because of an unhealthy "should…" Go for it!
    c. If you choose to wait until "the last minute," which works for some people (procrastinators unite!), that's okay too. You get to decide.
15. Another technique is to think of using a "bad should" toward someone else that you really love and care about. You may realize: "I would never say that to them, so why am I saying it to myself?" (This could also be used as a stopping mechanism, see #5.)
16. Sometimes a seemingly "bad should" can help us in our **personal growth**. For example: If I call my sister an idiot and think, "I shouldn't have said that," it gives me a chance to take accountability, to self-correct, and to reaffirm my intention to be kind.
17. One last idea… A silly way (or perhaps offensive, sorry about that!) to call out this thought distortion is the phrase: "Don't *should* on yourself!"

In closing, when you hear the word "should" in your words or thoughts (or being said to you), use your feelings as a guide. If the "should" feels good or neutral, no intervention is needed. If it feels bad, remind yourself that you are in charge and have choices about how to proceed with your thoughts and behavior. Deal with the "should" on your own terms and for your own reasons while taking others into consideration according to your value system.

Please be kind, loving, and compassionate as you tinker with the "shoulds" in your life!

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