

Strategies for Using a Systems Thinking Approach



Adopting a systems thinking approach as a Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) program leader requires a shift from linear, cause-and-effect thinking to a broader, more curious mindset. The following strategies can help you make that shift when trying to bring about desired change within your program.

Strategy 1: Reframe your thinking around solving complex problems

The table below presents an approach to reframe your thinking when confronting a TPP program challenge, which can sometimes affect the entire system of care. For example, consider the challenge of low participant recruitment and retention rates for your program—or identify a challenge your program is dealing with right now—and follow the prompts in the table to shift your mindset to be more of a systems thinking one.

REFRAME YOUR THINKING

Instead of...	Try...
Blaming someone	Asking yourself what may have led the person to speak or act in that way
Stating “I know the answer,” say...	Saying, “I have another perspective on this issue.”
Thinking you know the answer...	Looking for evidence to confirm your theory, in addition to evidence that does not confirm it.
Focusing on one item...	Looking at all the variables that affect that item.
Looking at the content of what people say...	Looking for the process of what they say. How are they saying it? What are they not saying? What are the common themes in the content?
Focusing on negative behaviors...	Looking at what is motivating these behaviors, or if they are masking a deeper problem.
Just looking at what people are doing...	Looking at the external circumstances and issues that drive what they are doing.

Strategy 2: Track and address an event

Once you have identified the patterns/trends, underlying structures, and mental models* behind your TPP program “event” or issue, you will better understand the many factors behind this event and their influence on your program’s system of care. With this clarity, you can then address where your system of care needs to be strengthened and what improvements to make.

The *Iceberg* model can be used to track a TPP program event—or issue—that needs to be addressed. Each level down the iceberg offers a deeper understanding of the system being examined as well as increased leverage for changing it. See the TPP program example below.

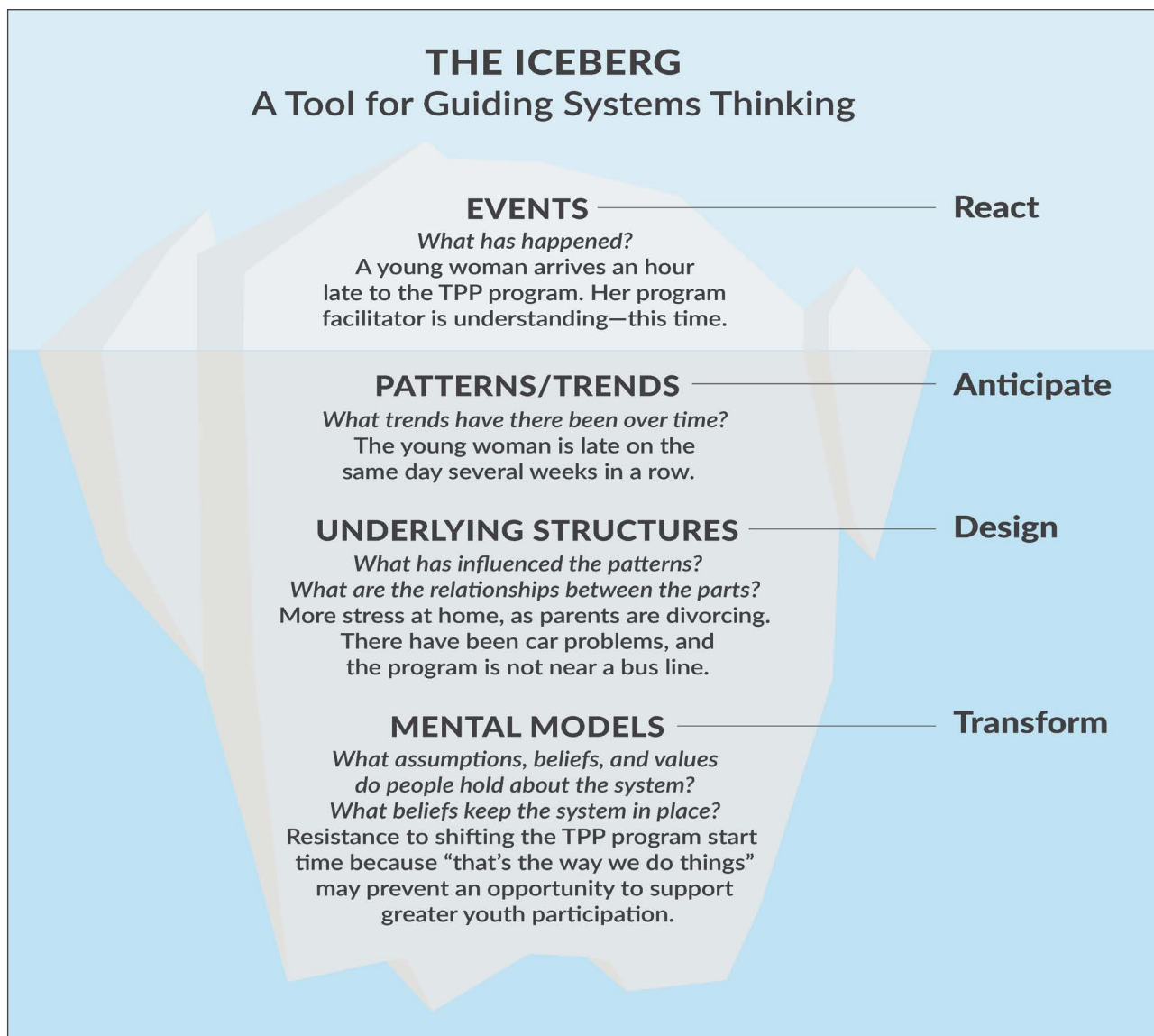


Image adapted from Ecochallenge. (2018). A systems thinking model: The iceberg. <https://ecochallenge.org/iceberg-model/>

*Everyone carries ideas and beliefs about how systems are structured and how the problems within them operate. Those ideas and beliefs are called mental models.

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