

What Is a Requirement? The Hidden Rule Behind Stress | I-System Institute

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Have you ever reacted to something small like it was actually a big deal?
Someone cuts you off in traffic.
A text goes unanswered for a few hours.
Your kid leaves their shoes in the middle of the hallway.
Again.
And suddenly you're not just mildly annoyed. You're furious. Or hurt. Or replaying it for the rest of the day.

In Mind-Body Bridging (MBB), the [Depressor](#) and the [Fixer](#) get a lot of attention, and for good reason. But both of them are set off by something that comes first: a Requirement. Understanding Requirements may be the single most useful thing you can learn about your own stress, because it explains why a five-second inconvenience can hijack your entire afternoon.

What Is a Requirement?

In Mind-Body Bridging, a Requirement is a rigid rule your mind holds about how you, other people, or the world should be. It shows up as a “should” or a “must,” even when you never say the word out loud.

“People should text back quickly.”
“My kids should listen the first time.”
“I should never be late.”
“Life should be fair.”

These aren't goals or preferences. A preference bends. A Requirement doesn't. When reality doesn't match a Requirement, the I-System, the stress-driven part of the

mind-body system, reads it as a threat to your identity, not just an inconvenience, and reacts accordingly.

Why a Small Thing Can Feel Like a Big Thing

This is what makes Requirements so easy to miss. The Requirement itself is often invisible. What you notice is the reaction: the tight chest, the sharp comment, the racing thoughts. It's tempting to blame the situation entirely — the traffic, the text, the shoes in the hallway.

But if the same situation doesn't bother you on a good day and completely derails you on a hard one, the situation isn't the real variable. Your Requirements are.

Where Requirements Set Off the Rest of the I-System

Once a Requirement is violated, it rarely stays quiet. It tends to open the door for two familiar patterns:

- The Depressor turns the moment into a story about you: “I always let people push me around.” “I'm a bad parent.” “Nobody respects my time.”
- The Fixer jumps in to make the discomfort go away, often through overworking, overexplaining, or trying to control the outcome.

Where you find one part of the I-System, you tend to find the others close behind. That's why naming the Requirement early, before the Depressor and Fixer take over, matters so much.

How Requirements Show Up in Everyday Life

- At work: “I should always know the answer.” “Meetings should start on time.”
- In relationships: “My partner should just know what I need.” “People should never disagree with me in public.”
- With yourself: “I should be further along by now.” “I shouldn't need this much rest.”
- With the world in general: “This should be easier.” “Things should go the way I planned.”

Most of these sound reasonable in the moment. That's exactly why they're so hard to catch.

How to Recognize Your Own Requirements

The next time you notice a reaction that feels bigger than the situation, try asking:

- What did I expect to happen here?
- What rule did I just assume everyone was supposed to follow?
- What “should” or “must” is hiding underneath this feeling?

Naming the Requirement, even quietly to yourself, is often enough to loosen its grip.

How to Interrupt a Requirement

Mind-Body Bridging uses a practice called [RELACS](#) to help calm the I-System and reconnect with the present moment.

Recognize

Notice the tension, urgency, or racing thoughts.

Label

Name the Requirement driving the reaction. For example:

“I have a Requirement that this line should be moving faster.”

Come to Your Senses

Pause and reconnect with what's actually around you right now — sounds, textures, your own breath.

You Don't Have to Argue with “Should”

Requirements aren't a flaw. They're often built from things that genuinely matter to you: fairness, respect, competence, connection. The goal isn't to stop caring about those things. It's to notice when a rigid rule about how they should show up is doing more damage than the situation itself.

Ready to learn more?

The I-System Institute offers [free introductory MBB Clinic sessions](#) and [workshops](#) to help you practice recognizing your own Requirements with support and guidance.

The next time something small sets you off, it might be worth asking what rule just got broken — and whether it was ever really a rule at all.