

Change your thinking, for more resilience and well being.

Our mind never stops, it chatters all day and all night. We can give our mind a break from the constant chatter by practising mindfulness: to be in the here and now, present, aware, using our senses to observe, without judging, appreciating what is around us. With every moment of self-awareness, we have the opportunity to re-program our brain. The way we talk to ourselves will determine how we feel in the moment. Instead of being at the mercy of our negative, unhelpful thoughts, we can get out of our head, observe and direct our thinking consciously in a helpful manner.



Thoughts are not facts. We are able to differentiate between thoughts, feelings and facts, hence increase our wellbeing and decision-making ability.

“We are disturbed not by the events, but by the way we perceive them”. Epictetus 55-135AD

We may not always have control over events, but we can gain control over the way we react to them. When we experience a difficult emotion/feeling (e.g., depression, guilt, anger or anxiety), it is usually preceded by a number of automatic self-talks or thoughts. Often, these self-talks may be along certain themes, they may be repeating stories or ideas: worrying about the future (causing fear, anxiety), brooding over our wrongdoing (causing guilt), someone else's wrongdoing (causing anger) or rumination, rehashing past difficult experiences (causing distress, pain, depression). We may also be unduly dwelling on the problematic aspects and not focusing on the possible solutions. We can't choose our feelings but we can choose how we think about something which in turn will modulate our feelings. The more we practice this, the better we get at changing our thoughts, to change our mind...to change our brain...to promote our wellbeing.

When you are feeling difficult emotions you may take the following steps: First, stop, breathe, exhale long, breathing in and out of your abdomen, then observe what is around you through your senses, and observe the sensations in your body in a non-judgmental way. Second ask yourself: “What am I thinking now? What am I saying to myself about this event? (You may wish to write your thoughts in a journal.) And then ask yourself the following questions about what you are thinking:

Is it true? ... Is it helpful? ... Is it kind? ... Is it pointing to a solution?

If the answer is “no” to one of those questions, then modify your self-talks and explore other perceptions of the events which are more helpful. Unhelpful thinking follows patterns, which often are automatic, even unconscious until we start paying attention to them; we then become “aware”. By becoming more aware, we can change our thinking which in turn can change our emotional style for the better. The following “unhelpful thinking styles are mind traps which can cause a great deal of unnecessary emotional distress:

Inner critic, inner bully: The way we relate to ourselves in our own mind will determine our feelings and performance. Often, we talk to ourselves in a very negative and discouraging manner. We insult and make harsh judgments to ourselves. You can turn your life around by being your own best friend: offering yourself the acceptance, understanding, kindness as well as positive, realistic encouragements.

Comparing: When we compare, we may see our self as worse, inferior or inadequate in some ways, magnifying the positive attributes of other people and dismiss our own positive characteristics. Or we may be doing the opposite, exaggerating our attributes, assessing our self as better, superior, more able and ignoring the positive attributes of others. Either way, when we unduly compare, we fail to see what is, creating difficulties in relationships. Comparing leads to feelings of “being different”, disconnected, worthless and isolated, developing contempt for ourselves and/or for others. Instead, we can accept our self and others as we are, warts and all, focusing on seeing the positive while trying to improve on the negative. By seeking to accept and understand ourselves and others, we can connect, have richer, more meaningful relationships.

Black & White Thinking: This thinking style involves seeing only one extreme or the other. You or someone else is either wrong or right, good or bad and so on. There are no “in-between” or shades of grey.

Jumping to Conclusions: We jump to conclusions when we assume that we know what someone else is thinking or their intentions (mindreading) and when we make predictions about what is going to happen in the future (predictive thinking-assumptions). It is important to differentiate between our assumptions and facts: to check their likelihood and truth before we make decisions.

Personalisation: This involves seeing our whole self involved instead of specific events, actions or words. You blame yourself for everything that goes wrong or could go wrong, even when you are only partly responsible or not responsible at all. When you make a mistake or are displeased with yourself, it is important to consider that it is the actions, the behaviours that you disapprove, not the whole person. Actions can be changed and improved on and the whole person is worthwhile. Rather than dwelling on the mistake, focus on what you can do better next time, develop a positive plan. Similarly, if someone disagrees with your ideas, remember it is the idea that you are debating, it is not the value of you as a human being that is debated. One can listen and look for an alternative without taking it personally as a loss of face.

Overgeneralisation: When we overgeneralise, we take one instance in the past or present, and impose it on all current or future situations. We say “You always...” or “Everyone...”, or “I never...”, “It will always be...”, and so on. Instead, we can remind ourselves of the specific events and see clearly how they relate to the situation currently and in the future. Similarly, when we are unhappy about someone else’s action we can make a positive request of what we would like them to do specifically.

Catastrophising, dramatizing, or fatalistic capitulation: This is when we “blow things out of proportion” and we judge the situation as terrible, awful, dreadful, hopeless when in reality the problem may be manageable. In our own mind, we exaggerate the significance of an unpleasant event or the difficulty of a problem. We believe that it is “unsurmountable” instead of looking at how we can resolve it. For example, when we are sick we may think that we will never get better.

Shoulding and Musting: Often by saying “I should...” or “I must...” or “I need...” or “He/she should...” or “It must...”, we can put unreasonable demands on our self and others. We often believe that there is something magical about those words and that somehow by saying or thinking “should”, we can make it happen as we wish. In saying ‘should’ we are denying reality by only focussing on what “must be”, not accepting “what is”. What we really mean when we are “shoulding” is “I would like...”, “I would prefer. It is good to have high standards and goals. But when we substitute our “should” for “what I would like”, we become more realistic and flexible, we can see “what is” directly and come up with more effective solutions.

Emotional Reasoning: This involves making decisions mostly of avoidance based solely on our feelings. For instance, you had one bad experience about something so you will avoid similar situations. Or you feel that something bad is going to happen just because you think it. It is not because you think it that it is so.

The world owes me: This consist of thinking: “*life owes me*” because of numerous reasons: being born, difficult childhood, being abused, working hard, being treated unfairly or have an incredible ability, talent or look. Life is a journey. We may not like what has happened to us, we may feel deprived, cheated. We can choose to focus on what we don’t have or focus on what we have. We owe it to our self to take good care of ourselves and to learn ways to have a fulfilling, happier life. We can make it happen. It may seem that others have it easier. It is difficult to know exactly how others have created their good fortunes. We can focus on the positives in our lives, be grateful for what we have, adopt realistic desires/expectations and take steps to make our dreams become a reality.

Blame game: It is always the fault of someone else or events. In this way, there is no learning since the person never looks in to see how they could modify their actions to obtain a different outcome.

Excessive worries, dislike, hate, anger: Ongoing anger and hate as well as anxiety are toxic emotions. We can explore different ways to perceive a situation so we increase our understanding, acceptance and tolerance but still when required, we are able to assert and protect our self.

We see what we believe: Our expectations will determine what we see and we will dismiss events/actions that contradict our beliefs. We can choose to see what is wrong, being critical, negative, dwelling in contempt, and hate or we can choose better by seeing the good in self and others, accepting, appreciating, being grateful, connecting, engaging with others, seeing the similarities rather than the differences. We are all human. We all have stories of hardships, sorrow and joy. We all seek to be valued and accepted... “just like me.”

Copyright. January 2017. Marie Bloomfield, Clinical Psychologist, M. Psychol., MAPS

Website: www.bloomfieldpsychology.com.au Or www.mindfulpath.com.au

For more information please email marie@bloomfieldpsychology.com.au