

## Helpful and Unhelpful Thinking

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A wise Greek philosopher once said, “I have noticed that people are not disturbed so much by things as by their opinions about those things.” (Epictetus) This means that what bothers us is really our own thoughts, not what happens to us. Our opinions, or our own thoughts sometimes stop being our servants and become our masters. The job of thinking is to make us capable and confident. When our thoughts make us feel miserable, it is time to put those thoughts in their place.

**When you find you feel miserable for long periods of time, it is a certain sign your thoughts are no longer serving you. They have taken on a life of their own. Misery is a signal to change something. Listen to the signal.**

Misery can include **anger, jealousy, fear**, and many other unpleasant feelings. All of these feelings are normal and natural, *when they last a short time*. Children experience bad feelings but naturally drop negative thoughts and recover quickly. They know something we have forgotten. Thoughts are supposed to be temporary. If they last a long time, then the feeling is being produced by thoughts that run through your mind over and over. This kind of thinking is called **rumination**. If you ruminate on a memory about a bad event or thought or experience, you will continue to feel the same bad feeling.

“But how do I stop *ruminating* about an event or memory? Are you telling me to stop thinking about it?”

Oddly enough, if you try to make yourself stop thinking about something (like, telling yourself, “Stop thinking about that!”) the attention you give the thought when trying to stop it actually empowers that thought. It comes back more and more. Thoughts survive and grow when we give them energy and attention. Being upset at a thought makes it come back more and more.

Instead, we detach from the thought. We look at it with *impartiality*. Maybe it is just a negative thought and doesn’t really mean anything. We lose interest when we see something as useless or irrelevant. When we lose interest in something, it stops occurring to us. We teach ourselves that the thought is not useful or important, and it gradually withers away. If you lose interest in upsetting thoughts they will wither away.

Step 1 DECISION: Analyze the thought in a completely new way. Most people want to decide whether the thought is true or false. This is not the point. Thoughts are only *helpful* or *unhelpful*. You need to look at the pros and cons of thinking that thought. Does it help you? Does it give you a clear head? A peaceful heart? Does it help you feel confident and calm and relaxed? After all, we all know we function at our best when we feel good, do we not? Are you ready to feel better? Are you ready to see that peace is more important than ‘being right’ no matter how upset we are? Commit yourself to supporting thoughts that support a peaceful heart.

Step 2 ACTION: If you decide you are ruminating on a thought, that it is not helpful, and you would be better off personally if you could drop that thought, then begin the detachment process:

1. **SELF-AWARENESS**: Notice when you are feeling the negative emotion most strongly. Track down the thought that is giving you that feeling. Identify the thought. It is usually a thought about yourself or someone else that is judgmental and negative.
2. **INSIGHT**: Realize that thought gives you the bad feeling. Become aware that it is not the situation that is now affecting you, it is just the thought that is in your head. The thought is not serving you.

It is controlling you. *This point is very important. You need to recognize it is not the situation that causes you to feel bad, it is your own thinking.*

3. *DETACHMENT*: Now comment on the thought: “That thought is not helpful. I don’t have to think it. It is not useful. I am not obligated to pay attention to it.” When the thought bounces back, just *gently* tell yourself, “I find that thought useless. I don’t have to pay attention to it.” (If you are upset or angry with yourself, it will just give the thought more energy and it will come back more and more. It is important to be gentle and respectful to yourself.)
4. *REFOCUS*: Do something positive and pleasant. Reward yourself for dealing with that thought. Keep a list of small positive things you can do that will raise your spirits, such as a walk with a dog, work in the garden, and so on.
5. *PATIENCE & APPRECIATION*: Eventually the thought will fade, and you will feel more peaceful. Now appreciate that feeling. It is important to show some gratitude and appreciation for good feelings. Pay attention to good feelings, and just notice briefly when you have bad feelings. Never analyze bad feelings because that just gives them more power.

Step 3 MAINTAIN YOUR GAINS: Whenever the thought reoccurs you will notice it has less and less emotional impact on you. Sincere appreciation to yourself helps. Your mind is detoxifying the thought, without you even having to know about it. Take some pleasure and satisfaction in noticing how your mind heals old wounds when you stop ruminating.

Our minds are made to function with curiosity, openness, constant learning, and even love and joy. When those are present, we are in a state of high functioning. We do things for the sheer joy of it. Our ordinary tasks seem interesting, just as when we were innocent children, and each task, from washing dishes to watching ants, seemed endlessly entertaining. When we are at peace, we rediscover that deep inner state of perfect mental health. It is always there, just waiting for our negative thoughts to quiet down and get out of the way. May you discover your own perfect mental health today!