

Are you out of your mind?

By: Stephen Clasper

If you're not, perhaps you should be, at least part of the time. From the moment you wake until you fall asleep at night your mind is in constant chatter, more than you realize. We cannot **not** think and this becomes a problem because for most of us this mental chatter tends to be negative, whether about ourselves or about others. In spite of our progress over the centuries, we're still hard wired for fight or flight and inclined to look for problems that could trip us. This relentless negativity takes its toll in the form of stress and limits how we respond to events.

Do you know just how much thinking you do every day and how much of it is negative? If your watch has a timer, set it to beep every hour, perhaps over the weekend when you have time to do this. Every time it beeps, check what you were just thinking and the chances are that it wasn't important. Then check whether your thought was more negative than positive. If you're like most people, you will find that most of your thoughts are negative. Once you're aware of your inclination toward negative thinking, you can do something about it and there are several approaches that work.

Distraction

As soon as you realize you're about to launch into some negative observation about yourself ("what was I thinking when I chose that dress?") or about someone else ("Susie's putting on a lot of weight!"), stop and distract yourself. Simply, looking away at something else that's neutral or that carries no negative meaning for you, before you get too locked into your original thought, will often work. The more you practice distracting yourself, the easier it becomes and you will find yourself naturally tending toward positive thoughts most of the time.

Reframing

The second is to reframe the thought you've just had. Every thought and every interpretation you place on what you see or hear is filtered, of course, through your own experience of life since childhood. We think that what we observe is reality, but it's nothing more than our own interpretation of what happened. The sooner we accept this, the easier it is to find another explanation or way of looking at what just happened.

This quotation from The Talmud puts it perfectly: "We do not see the world as it is. We see the world as we are." As soon as we put a different perspective on something, literally put a different frame around the picture, we discover how *limiting* our previous view was. Then we can move forward with a more objective set of "facts". Wayne Dyer put it eloquently when he said: "It's never too late to have a happy childhood."

Step out of your mind for a moment

Sometimes we're so overwhelmed by what someone said or by what happened to us that we just don't think straight. The longer we dwell on it, the more embellished the "story" that we concoct about how awful, useless, or stupid we are. We tell ourselves that we always get things wrong. No amount of rational thinking or will power can lift us from

this gloom. The only way is to stop the faulty thinking in its tracks, before we create the story, by focusing on one or more of our five senses.

Stop for five minutes to make a coffee (or anything) and focus only on your senses. Feel the coolness of the cup in your hand, listen to the water boil, then you watch the water swirl in the cup as you take in the aroma. When it's ready, notice the taste and the temperature as the coffee hits your tongue. Alternatively, find some other way to focus only on your senses. You could, for example, listen to the sounds coming from the street outside your window or feel the texture of what you're wearing. After five minutes, you can then return to what happened and look at it in a calmer, more rational way.

Meditate your problems away

The many forms of meditation available today share the aim of giving you a break from too much analysis, too much attachment to the way you want things to be. Sit still in a quiet place and focus your awareness only on your breathing or an image or a sound, so that your usual thoughts don't come through. The objective is to change your automatic thought processes and, as meditation becomes a daily practice, you will begin to set time aside for calm, honest reflection.

Shakespeare's Hamlet sums it up perfectly when he says: "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so".

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