

SOURCE LINES

REDUCE STRESS BY “UNTWISTING” YOUR THINKING: PART TWO—SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

This is the third of three newsletters to look at things all of us can do to remove **un-necessary stress** from our lives by changing some of the ways we think about our life and the world around us. Especially un-necessary are those ways of looking at things that leave us **needlessly upset**.

Before giving some suggestions for making any changes let's return to last month's newsletter. Our April newsletter generated more comments and emails than any previous month. Not surprisingly almost everyone who contacted us said, more or less, "Hurray up and give us the solution part of this process so we can begin figuring out how to change the twisted thinking of some difficult people we work with." Reading these comments reminded me of Jean Paul Sartre, a famous 20th Century French philosopher and writer who wrote, "Hell is other people." Now Jean Paul was not famous for looking on the bright side of things but there is something to what he said. **A fair bit of the grief we all endure comes out of our relations with others — or more properly, from the ways we think about and react to others: co-workers, bosses, parents, partners, children, neighbors, etc.**

Alas, with thought and practice we can only change ourselves and how we think and feel and react to many situations in our lives. True, when we act differently it opens the door for others to behave differently. Whether and how they react is up to them. The following then is an outline of steps to begin untwisting your twisted thoughts. It is met only as an introduction to a process of changing.

About the "thought and practice" my friend says, "**SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.**"

A SSEMBLY INSTRUCTIONS

STEP ONE:

Re-read the list of types of "twisted thinking" outlined in April, 2003 issue of **SOURCE LINES**. Pick the varieties that seem most like your style. Most of us fall into them sometimes. Write out a list of your "favorites" (the ones you use most frequently). Write out the explanation. Now carry it with you for a week and read it over now and then.

STEP TWO:

Most of us can be fairly certain that we are having some twisted thoughts anytime we notice ourselves having **strong negative feelings**. *Feeling lonely, unhappy, scared, tense, annoyed, humiliated, jealous, depressed, hopeless, angry, guilty, ashamed, nervous, sad, irritated, etc.*, is often a first sign that we are exaggerating or distorting our thoughts. The trick is to **catch yourself having a strong emotional reaction to something or someone, actual or imagined and stop yourself for a minute**.

STEP THREE:

Now you have caught yourself having some surge of negative emotions. The next step is to recall the thoughts that raced through your head just before your emotions kicked into high-gear. What you are looking for are your **automatic thoughts or images or memories**, ones that whizzed through your brain effortlessly. **Automatic thoughts** just appear, automatically and we accept them as truth. For example, if you are someone who is nervous about public speaking, then before making an important presentation at work you might have thoughts like: "I have to present departmental quarterly results tomorrow. I hate standing up and giving these reports. Everyone will be bored with my presentation. What if I start shaking and can't remember what I have to say? Everyone will see how nervous I am. I'm such

a loser?” All of these thoughts are like race-fuel for nervousness. Psychologists refer to the strongest of these thoughts as “**hot thoughts**.”

Can you identify the types of twisted thinking that’s driving this person’s nervousness* (answers at bottom of next column).

Often this step can be very “freeing” when we begin to see what we are doing and begin to take back control of our own thinking or “basic operating system” to use a computer-world notion to describe our thinking. Really what we are starting to do is to discover the rules used by what some people call our unconscious. Whatever terms you use it comes down to examining our habitual ways of thinking and feeling and responding to events and people and ideas in our life. This is good.

STEP FOUR:

Once you have caught yourself having strong negative feelings and identified your automatic thoughts, make note of the **specific situation** you were in when the feeling appeared. For example: **trying unsuccessfully to go to sleep the night before making an important presentation at work**. Keep the description simple and specific. Over time, this step can be useful in recognizing patterns of those times when we are most likely to have negative feelings. Identifying these patterns can be very useful as a means of targeting where we want to focus our efforts to better understand and manage our thinking and feeling and behaviour. So in this case of our nervous presenter, the person’s disrupted sleep is connected to worrying about performing at an upcoming task at work (social anxiety). Having this information helps us locate areas to try and make some useful changes: (1) relaxation training for bedtime, (2) changing some of the needlessly alarming automatic thinking through counselling, and (3) training in making professional presentations.

So far we have identified 3 important elements that fit together like a puzzle that we often only pay attention to a piece of: **(1) Situation; (2) Feelings; (3) Automatic Thoughts, Images or Memories**. When our behaviour is hijacked by our feelings our twisted thinking is usually responsible. Making efforts to put these pieces together

and looking carefully to see what types of distorted or twisted thinking we are up to can be a giant step to relieving ourselves of un-necessary stress. It is a process that is ongoing. To borrow a manufacturing concept we could call this TPM of Mental Health. We have to work at our thinking consciously and regularly. We have to shut down and check for necessary repairs or replacements. The nervous presenter, for example, soon discovered a way of engaging his audience in participating in the discussion of otherwise dry, technical data. Once he made this discovery the presentations took on a new life and the fear of being boring became quite manageable. A new, less stressful way of seeing things was created. And the lessening of worry met he had energy and time at work to do other things on the day of a presentation where before the dread of presenting was an obstacle to getting much done at all.

This has been a brief introduction with a simple example to some of the basic steps to untwisting our thinking. The process is called Cognitive Restructuring. The psychological method is called Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). The evidence is in on CBT. With effort, it works. The good news is the changes we are describing are changes that can be made incrementally and all take place inside our head. No diet, physical exercise, smoke cessation or 12-Step Program required. However, all of these can be helpful too.

If you would like to talk about your efforts to “untwist” your own thinking please give your EAP counsellor a call. Below are 3 books that are famous for helping people with the process outlined above.

DAVID D. BURNS, M.D., FEELING GOOD: THE NEW MOOD THERAPY

DAVID D. BURNS, M.D., THE FEELING GOOD HANDBOOK
DENNIS GREENBERGER, PH.D., AND CHRISTINE A. PADESKY, PH.D., MIND OVER MOOD: CHANGE HOW YOU FEEL BY CHANGING THE WAY YOU THINK

***Answers to Nervous Thinking Example: Catastrophizing, Labeling, Personalization, & Fortune Telling Error**

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