How to Change Unhelpful Thinking – With Love from Dr. G

Greetings Country Family and Happy Monday!

By now, hopefully you’ve read all of my previous posts. This post “How to Change Unhelpful Thinking” builds upon the earlier documents posted. In case you’re wondering to which posts I am referring, check the “Files” link on the left of the main pages of any of the closed Route 91 sites, or you may be able to find them on my personal FB page. All of my documents should be accessible, and if for some reason you cannot access them and would like to read them, feel free to email me at shivaghaed@gmail.com and I will happily send them to you directly. Feel free to share and pass any and all of these forward. Perhaps they will help you, your family members, and friends. As a new year approaches, let’s all make an effort to think, feel, and act in healthier ways. Here’s to a better 2018!

Previous documents posted:

25Oct2017 - Trauma 411

29Oct2017 - Rules and Compassion (PDF poster)

04Nov2017 - How PTSD Develops (also included Classical Conditioning diagram)

01Nov2017 - Sleep Basics

04Nov2017 - Why Avoidance Makes It Worse

13Nov2017 - Finding New Meaning After Trauma

20Nov2017 - Anxiety and Panic

People often begin to recognize they are not doing well because they notice negative emotional states that stick around. For example, it’s one thing to feel sad for an hour, but another to feel sad for days, weeks, months, or years. These emotional states are no longer considered to be “natural” ones, but are rather called “manufactured.” So, we must ask, what is manufacturing these negative emotions (e.g., sadness, fear or anxiety, anger, disgust, shame or guilt)? The answer is simple…THOUGHTS are the culprit. And unfortunately, when we also engage in behaviors (usually the unhealthier ones), they may also reinforce these negative thought patterns and emotional states. A simple way to think of this process is as follows:

THOUGHTS (attitudes/beliefs) 🡪 EMOTIONS (feelings) 🡪 BEHAVIORS (actions)

If we want to change the way we feel, then we must look to our thoughts and behaviors. It’s important to make change on both ends. If you’ve read the earlier posts, you know just how important it is to your recovery (or health overall) to not avoid (remember Rule #5 from the Rules poster). Behaviors are often an easier place to start because actions are tangible and we can easily set goals. This is the reason I have emphasized moving to action immediately following Route 91, and NOT AVOIDING regardless of how uncomfortable or triggering a situation might be for you. Changing thought patterns can be more challenging, often because we are simply unaware of many of our thoughts. Thus, we call them “automatic thoughts.” They tend to be habitual, and we default to them especially when we are in more negative emotional states. The dangerous part of this is how thoughts and feelings can become HABITS. The bad news is that they are easy habits to slip into, but the good news is they can be changed with a little effort.

Here’s a quick guide to making change in these arena. First, pay attention to how you feel. Identifying a negative emotional state quickly will help you then begin to question the origins of all those negative emotions. You can’t fix it if you don’t know what “it” is! Once you recognize that you have been “on edge” all day, then ask yourself what you are thinking about, and how these thoughts may be causing your anxiety. Once you have identified the negative thoughts creating those negative emotions then we move to the challenging part of the process: We take each thought into a virtual courtroom to question the validity of the thought or belief. In trying to poke holes in the negative belief, it might be helpful to identify the type of Unhelpful Thought it is (refer to diagram). We often refer to these unhealthy or unhelpful thought patterns as “Stinkin’ Thinkin’.” Sometimes getting some perspective can help you replace the really extreme or negative thought with a more helpful, balanced, realistic, or accurate thought. Ask yourself questions like these:

If my best friend or someone I love came to me and made this statement, what would I say to them?

In 5 or 10 years, will I likely feel differently about this? Will this seem as important or urgent in the future?

If I had to defend this belief in a courtroom, would I be able to prove it to a jury? Do I have ample evidence to support this belief? Do I have any evidence that actually contradicts my belief?

Once we are aware enough of the problem, and willing to be open to the possibility that the way we think (i.e., our “truth”) may actually NOT be true or helpful, then we can move towards change. The ultimate goal is to temper our thoughts and feelings, get them out of the black or white (i.e., extreme) zones and move them into the gray zone. We want to replace unhelpful thoughts with healthier ones. Perhaps the new thoughts are not happy ones, but we want them to be more balanced because that is healthier for us. More neutral thoughts will lead to more neutral feelings, and more well thought out (i.e., less impulsive or emotionally-driven) behaviors.

I’ve uploaded/provided two worksheets to accompany this document. The first is titled “UNHELPFUL THINKING STYLES” and the second is titled “CBT THOUGHT RECORD.” CBT stands for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, which is one of the most effective and helpful tools we have in the field currently.

Good luck kickin’ the stinkin’ thinkin’ and remember…this is one of the very few things in your life you actually can control. So let’s grab the bull by the horns and just DO IT!