

The Quest4Life Podcast Show Notes:

Season #3, Episode #21: Take Your Thoughts Captive

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Research informs us that we have something like 60,000 to 70,000 thought per day according to the Cleveland Clinic. Let that sink in for a second...60,000 to 70,000 thoughts per day stemming from a 3-pound universe using 100 billion neurons that connect at more than 500 trillion points through synapses that travel 300 miles per hour.

According to the National Science Foundation, 80% of those 60,000 to 70,000 thoughts per day are negative and 95% of them are repetitive. Let that sink in for a second. 80% of our thoughts per day, which is roughly 50,000 thoughts per day, are negative and only 3,000 or so of our thoughts occur when we AREN'T on autopilot.

Those data points are quite sobering to consider and it's no wonder how people can let their thoughts take them and their lives captive. Now is the time to the flip the script by reviewing ways to level up your mindset by taking your thoughts captive and not continuing to live in a perpetual state of negativity, stress, or anxiety.

And by examining your thoughts more critically, you have a shot at achieving peak performance in all areas of your life.

The Backstory

For starters, the 80% of the thoughts every day that are negative may or may not have merit. For example, you may have been on the receiving end of unjust commentary from your supervisor and are likely fully justified in thinking negatively about it. Those moments, however, tend to make up a fraction of the total number of negative thoughts that keep taking you captive. And for most of those thoughts, such as doubts, fears, insecurities, or unresolved pain from past trauma are causing more harm than good and certainly disallowing you from living a deeply fulfilling life or showing up better for yourself so you can show up better for others.

For example, let's say you had a weight loss goal, and you make a commitment to yourself to attack it with vim and vigor only to find yourself standing in front of the mirror a few weeks in, acknowledging that you haven't changed your eating or movement patterns. In that moment, you may say to yourself, "It's no use. I'm just a failure."

Or you had another relationship end because you carried the baggage from your childhood and/or past relationships into that one. In that moment, you may say to yourself, "I'm no good. I'll never find love."

Or you don't pursue the promotion at work because of lingering self-doubts as to whether you can do the job and, lo and behold, someone less skilled gets promoted in your place. In that

moment, you may say to yourself, “I’ll never get promoted if such-and-such was selected instead of me. Obviously, they are better than I am.”

In such situations, or those similar that fit within the context of your life, answer this question:

How’s it working for you?

Remember, 95% of the thoughts we have daily are repetitive. Thus, if you are living in a prison of your own thoughts, it’s Groundhog Day almost all day, every day. So, what can you do?

Taking Your Thoughts Captive

For starters, you need to become self-aware of your thoughts as they occur. This is simple to say, but not easy to do because it requires a tremendous amount of discipline in the moment to interrogate your thoughts. Provided you have the willingness to do this, you should develop some ritual or routine that allows you to snap yourself out of habitual thought patterns.

From there, you can consciously focus on reframing your thoughts instead of perpetuating the toxic conversations you keep having with yourself. For example, if you fail to honor your commitment to yourself about losing weight, instead of telling yourself, “I’m a failure,” tell yourself, “I’m going to give it another shot and find an accountability partner to join me on the journey.”

From there, begin journaling the progress you’ve made and celebrate even the smallest wins. For instance, if you catch yourself having a self-defeating thought and you’re able to snap yourself out of it in the moment, make note of it. That’s a win! If you’re able to reframe a negative thought to a positive one, or, at least, a neutral one, make note of it. That’s a win! If you wanted to lose one pound of body fat last week and you lost a ¼ of an ounce, make note of it. That’s a win! It’s progress! And what you will likely find by journaling is that, through conscious intention, you start taking your thoughts captive rather than the other way around.

Another thing you can do is to take stock of the type of information you are consuming from external sources, such as the news media, or family members or friends. Regarding the news media, we all appreciate that 95%+ of the “news” is negative. What gets communicated is saturated with death, destruction, and conflict. What I’m not saying here is that we shouldn’t be aware of what’s happening in the world. We should, but not at the expense of our psychological, emotional, physical, or spiritual well-being.

Further, who we choose to spend our time with matters a great deal and the influence we give others in our lives can either help or harm us. It’s been said that “Like attracts like.” Well, if you are a prisoner of your negative thoughts, what type of people are you attracting? Could it be that the people you let into your world detract rather than add to your life? Ideally, you’re surrounding yourself with people that encourage you to live a life that aligns with your worth...and you’re worth a great deal more than you may believe.

Another thing you can do to take your thoughts captive is to think through your problems rather than simply reacting to them. I mentioned last week in Season #3, Episode #20 of The

Quest4Life Podcast – “Escaping the Drama Triangle” – that most people tend to respond based on their first thought rather than consciously withdrawing in the moment to evaluate the thoughts that follow the first thought. So, when you experience challenges or problems, the first thought likely gets you into trouble, especially if you are perpetuating negative thought patterns.

A more effective approach is to assess alternative solutions to your problems while, simultaneously, assessing what you’re learning or have learned from the situation. What this does is allow you to break your thoughts down to determine whether there is any truth in them. Still further, it gives you pause to use inverse thinking, which is to say those thoughts that are the opposite of the current thoughts you’re having.

Yet another way you can take your thoughts captive is to practice gratitude. Research informs us that it is impossible, or next to impossible, to think negative thoughts at the same time you are practicing gratitude...and I absolutely encourage you to put that to the test.

For instance, think of something you are over-the-top grateful for...something or someone you love... something or someone you feel extraordinarily blessed to have in your life...something or someone that brings a smile to your face every time you think of it or them. While you hold that thought in your mind, try to think a negative thought. You see, to think the negative thought, you have to STOP thinking about the thing for which or person for whom you are grateful, which are two different thoughts!

Thus, practicing gratitude allows you to focus on things that add productive value to your life instead of staying mired in the negative feedback loop of your thoughts. Plus, research also points out that the practice of gratitude results in increased levels of happiness, which makes sense considering that you’re thinking about things that bring a smile to your face.

A final way to take your thoughts captive is to acknowledge that every thought and feeling you have is real and fair, but they may not be objectively real. For example, if you think or feel that “My anxiety is never going to get better” or “No one wants to marry me” or “Other people don’t like hanging out with me,” those thoughts and feelings are real and fair for you. What that doesn’t mean necessarily is, objectively speaking, that your anxiety won’t ever improve or that you’ll never get married or that, legitimately, no one wants to hang out with you.

Because the volume of thoughts and the intensity of the moment are so great, you become a prisoner of the moment and, subsequently, engage in behaviors that reinforce the thoughts and feelings, which can become highly dysfunctional.

To that point, the dysfunction is born out of reinforcing thoughts and feelings with behaviors that PROVE to yourself that your anxiety will never improve or that you’ll never get married or that no one wants to hang out with you. Instead, snap yourself out of it by using one or more of the previously mentioned approaches, such as saying to yourself, “I don’t feel good about myself right now. I’m feeling nervous and anxious. I do, however, know this feeling isn’t going to last forever and that I can take back control of my thoughts.” I think you’ll agree that an approach like that is far more productive than remaining a prisoner of your own mind.

Final Thoughts

Whether the information benefits you or someone else, consider digging deeper by asking the following questions:

- 1) To what end are my thoughts adding productive value to my life?
- 2) How is my external environment, such as information from the news media of the people affecting my thoughts and what am I willing to do about it?
- 3) How can I incorporate practicing gratitude into my daily habits to appreciate more of what brings me joy instead of emphasizing what I lack?

At this point, it should be evident that making even the smallest changes can reduce the number of negative thoughts, which is inversely correlated with having more positive ones...and there doesn't appear to be any downside in that.

As usual, it's food for thought, Fellow Questers.

