

Changing Our Relationship to Thoughts

By Dr. David T. Weibel

Two of the most popular and research supported psychotherapy approaches at the moment are the cognitive behavioral and mindfulness-based approaches. These approaches can be complementary (i.e., Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy), but they also have some basic differences that this sheet will explain. Dr. Weibel often offers both cognitive and mindfulness techniques to his clients, as it is often helpful to have different ways to work with one's thoughts and emotions, and different techniques work for different people.

Cognitive Behavioral therapy involves modifying or reframing irrational thoughts, and it has several premises:

1. All people think irrationally at times.
2. Irrational thoughts lead to problems such as poor decisions and negative emotional states.
3. Negative emotional states increase irrationality, creating a feedback loop.
4. Via awareness, questioning, perspective taking, creativity, and humor we can reframe irrational thoughts toward more rational and functional thinking patterns, improving feelings and behavior.

Styles of Irrational, Biased, Distorted, Skewed, or Negative Thinking

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Filtering | Not seeing positive aspects of a situation. Allowing the negative to be seen. |
| Over-generalizing | Coming to a broad conclusion from a single incident or piece of evidence. |
| Catastrophizing | Making a situation appear far worse than it is, a mountain out of a mole hill. |
| All or None | Classifying as good or bad, black or white, with no middle ground. Not appreciating that life is complex (grey) with many factors influencing situations. |
| Mind Reading | Magically knowing what people are feeling and why they act the way they do. |
| Personalizing | Thinking that everything people think or do is about you. |
| Shoulds | Following a list of strict rules and standards about how you and others should act. Being annoyed when people break rules; feeling guilty when you break them. |

Cognitive Therapy teaches people how to see their irrational thoughts, track the effect of thoughts on their emotions and behavior, and then modify, reframe, or change the thoughts. Cognitive therapy usually utilizes a thought tracking sheet (see Dr. Weibel's) to learn how to modify thoughts. After several weeks of practice, you will be able to do it without the sheet. To use the work sheet do the following steps.

Styles of Irrational, Biased, Distorted, Skewed, or Negative Thinking

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Filtering | Screening out (not noticing) positive aspects of a situation while allowing all the negative. |
| Over-generalization | Coming to a broad conclusion based on a single incident or piece of evidence. |
| Catastrophizing | Making a situation appear far worse than it is, making a mountain out of mole hill. |
| Personalization | Thinking that everything people think or do is about you. |
| All or None | Events and people are either good or bad, black or white with no middle ground. You forgot that most things are gray and complex with many factors influencing most events. |
| Shoulds | Following a list of strict rules and standards about how you and others should act. Being annoyed when people break rules; feeling guilty when you break them. |
| Mind Reading | Knowing what people are thinking and feeling and why they act the way they do without their having told you. |
| Blaming | Holding other people responsible for your pain, or, doing the opposite, and blame yourself for every problem. |

How can I react to a setback such as not getting a job?

| Negative Thinking | Optimistic Thinking |
|--|---|
| General “I’m a <i>failure</i> .” | Specific “I didn’t get this <i>one</i> job. There are millions more jobs out there.” |
| Internal “I must have interviewed poorly. I’m not employable.” | External “ <i>They</i> had 25 applicants. I didn’t quite fit as well as one of <i>them</i> .” |
| Permanent “I’ll <i>never</i> get hired.” | Temporary “I’ll get hired <i>soon</i> .” |

Shift your mind S.E.T. to Specific, External, & Temporary for a setback.

Situation

Choose an incident in which you experienced negative emotions, such as anger, jealousy, or sadness, and also suspect that your thoughts had been slightly negative, biased, or irrational. Write down only the factual elements of the situation. Be very clear, logical, and almost dull. Do not yet include your thoughts.

Thoughts

Write down all your thoughts about the situation. Do not censor yourself. We realize thoughts can get dark at 2 am. Try to be honest and include the ones that may have been irrational or unfounded.

Feelings

Write down the effect of these thoughts on your emotions. To use the broadest of brushes, negative emotions typically relate to being sad or mad.

Reframe

To reframe the thoughts the person engages in a series of questions, trying to uproot or loosen the hold of any negative or irrational thoughts.

Questions and their elaboration follow:

What is the evidence for your negative thoughts/ beliefs?

List only the factual evidence. The irrational mind typically goes beyond the evidence.

Are there any other possibilities or explanations?

Use your creative mind to come up with many alternatives to your negative interpretations.

Would someone else, perhaps a role model, think of the situation differently?

Think of someone whose mind and thinking you admire. See if you can think and act like that person. Watching a great athlete or performer can inspire and help us by providing a model. An effective thinker can be a model. That person is a human. You can think how they think. Borrow their mind.

Is there any grey between your black & white thinking?

Explore the grey. Realize that most situations in life are incredibly complex. Admit complexity and embrace it. Realize that people who demand simple explanations or decision rules (e.g., "It's either right or wrong"), probably do not have a full grasp of the situation, or are in a simple situation.

Would you always think this way? If you were in better mood?

Here we realize that our moods influence our thinking, just as thinking influences moods. So, if we notice irrational thinking, we check in and also notice and examine our mood. We recognize when our mood is coloring our thinking. We put on different glasses (dark versus rosy) and see the world differently when in a bad mood. So, we can learn to recognize this and not take our minds or thoughts

so seriously when in a bad mood. This might be the origins of the phrase “Sleep on it.” The people who coined that phrase long ago may have been realizing that a bad mood will cloud thinking, and tomorrow, after sleeping, the mood may change, allowing a new view of the situation. Thus, if you wake up in a bad mood, on the wrong side of the bed, don’t take your mind as seriously that day. Don’t make any huge decisions that day and don’t give huge credence to irrational thoughts that arise. If negative thoughts arise you can say, “wrong side day” and ignore them.

Can you learn to take yourself and your thoughts less seriously?

This is the ultimate task. Most of the great spiritual teachers have talked about getting over or beyond one’s self-absorption, one’s ego, and even one’s self. Having a humorous attitude toward one’s thoughts and problems, and even one’s self is a lifelong quest that pays major dividends and can be considered a hallmark of growth, maturity, and wisdom. By no means does laughing at one’s self indicate that one cannot be passionate about other people and the world. In fact, these flexibly humorous people are usually the most effective helpers.

Are these thoughts serving or helping you?

Ask, “Are these thoughts helping?” If the answer is no, ignore them. It is true that thoughts persist. Yet, we do have some control. Ask the question, “Are these thoughts helping me?” followed by the question, “Whose mind is this anyway?” The you or part of you that answers, ‘my mind’, can witness those thoughts and decide whether to take them seriously.

Change

Do I feel any different after engaging in the discovery and reframing? In the beginning, it might be useful to add a percentage (e.g., 20% better). If you feel 20% better after a five-minute procedure, that is a great bargain. Think if feeling 20% better stayed with you all day. There may be a synergistic benefit, as you now have energy to go exercise or meet friends. With time, you will likely improve your mood more than 20%.

EXAMPLE

Situation

For our example we will use a somewhat benign situation of a young person having dating anxiety. These techniques also can be applied with severe depression and anxiety. Imagine you are a 37-year-old single man who wants to meet the right woman and settle down. You meet a nice woman in the park and talk for twenty minutes. You have much in common. You both were thinking of going to a film festival. You give her your number so she can call you about the event. You are very excited. Your mind is fantasizing that she could be the one. Three days pass and she has not called about the event which happens in four days.

Thoughts (first-person)

I hoped that she would call by now. Why didn’t she call? Did I say something wrong? Perhaps I was too aggressive. Why didn’t I ask for her number? Maybe I was too pushy, weird, weak. She doesn’t like me. I’ve had horrible luck lately. Why am I no good with women? I’ll probably never meet the right

one. I'm already 37, and many of my friends are married. I'm a loser. What if I never meet the right one and convince her to marry me? Everyone will think I'm a loser. I'm a loser. I will likely die alone.

Feelings

Sad, depressed, angry

Reframing

What is the evidence for your negative thoughts/beliefs?

A new acquaintance, a woman who you fantasized about, letting your mind wander far into the future, has not called you for three days.

Are there any other possibilities or explanations?

She will call you five minutes from now. She will call you tomorrow. She's spontaneous and will call you two hours before the event. She never calls men, but is hoping to see you at the show. She liked you too, but is hoping to see you again in the park. She lost her phone. She lost the number. She has been busy. She has been stressed. She has a boyfriend.

You have had girlfriends, and you have had dates. Several women were willing to marry you, but you pushed them away. Thus, it is your standards, not women rejecting you, which contributes to your issues. You are not that old. Most people marry. Most people marry when the time is right. You will likely marry. Even then, all your issues will not magically be solved.

Would someone else, perhaps a role model think of the situation differently?

Yes, my mellow brother enjoys meeting women, but he accepts the entire dating process as it comes. He would enjoy the flirtation, but he would not allow his mind to develop huge expectations and fantasies. If she never called, he would not stress. He enjoys who he is with and never worries about whether he will end up married. He lets life come to him, and people are attracted to his relaxation. I can be him for a moment. I will borrow his mind.

Is there any grey between your black & white (all or none) thinking?

Yes, she may call. She may not. By no means would either one be a judgment on my attractiveness to women, nor a prediction of whether I will marry. In fact, there's no guarantee that I would be happier married. She may not be perfect. That was my infatuated mind creating a fantasy. I have had an average dating record, not a Don Juan, but not a loner either. I am a quality person with much to offer.

Would you always think this way? If you were in better mood?

No, I have been very stressed lately with work. I had to attend my younger brother's wedding last week, which may have made getting married seem more urgent. It is winter, which usually lowers my mood. If I get some exercise and sun, I bet I will feel better in a few days.

Reframing Irrational, Biased, or Negative Thinking

| Situation | Thoughts | Feelings | Reframe | Change |
|-----------|----------|--|--|--|
| Event | Beliefs | Consequences Emotions Mental State | <p>Can you observe the thoughts mindfully, noticing that they are just thoughts?</p> <p>What is the evidence for your negative thoughts / beliefs?</p> <p>Are there any other possibilities, perspectives, or explanations?</p> <p>Could someone else, perhaps a role model, think about the situation differently?</p> <p>Is there any gray between your black and white thinking?</p> <p>Would you always think this way? If you were in a better mood?</p> <p>Are the thoughts you have observed serving or helping you?</p> <p>Can you learn to take your thoughts and your self less seriously?</p> | <p>Improvement</p> <p>Δ in feelings</p> <p>using %</p> |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

Can you learn to take yourself and your thoughts less seriously?

I hope so. The future of the world does not depend on my romantic status. Almost everyone that has come before me and who will follow after me, had or will have dating issues. I don't judge single people, so people likely will not judge me. Or if they do, they are not kind and thus less worthy of knowing. I can invent a fictional movie plot, a doomsday scenario whereby a meteor is headed for the Earth, and the only way to stop it is if I get married in 1 year. Absurd. No one would watch that movie. It's just not that important whether I marry.

Are these thoughts serving or helping you?

No. I can't make her call me. I can go out and enjoy my life. By not obsessing about romance, and living with passion and direction, I will paradoxically be more likely to find it.

Change

Hopefully, we can now see that there is little evidence that she has rejected us, and our mood might be elevated 20%.

Mindfulness: Sidestepping the Battlefield

The cognitive therapy techniques described above can be very helpful and have been shown to work for many people for many conditions, ranging from anxiety and depression to eating disorders, to personality issues. Cognitive therapy involves chopping negative beliefs down to size much like a cross-examining attorney impugning the credibility of an opposing witness. Cognitive therapy often feels like a battle between positive and negative thoughts. It certainly sounds like common sense to replace negative thoughts with positive ones or chop the negative ones down to size. Yet, the battle keeps up focused on thoughts. Some people are already so competitive and combative that they will jump into the fray between the positive and negative thoughts. They are ferocious in their cross-examination. The problem is that the battle is now the problem. The person is constantly engaging in this battle and is always focused on thought reframing worksheets in their head. While we may be increasing the overall percentage of positive thinking, an ironic casualty of the battle, may be peace of mind, our ability to be present, to experience a moment without interpretation, and/or having a negative or even a positive thought about it.

Mindfulness is an entirely different approach that points out that it is experiencing, being present in the moment, that makes life enjoyable and allows us to act with wisdom. In mindfulness, we do not need to argue with our negative thoughts. We simply notice that our mind has drifted into negative thinking and then invite the mind to return to experience our body, our senses in the moment. For people that have battle fatigue from trying to combat their minds, mindfulness is a form of mental jujitsu that sidesteps the battle, allowing us to give our full attention to our lives in each moment. Please reference Dr. Weibel's mindfulness handout for more information. Try both cognitive and mindfulness approaches to see which works for you. They certainly can be combined.

References

Beck, J. (2011). *Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Basics and Beyond*, 2nd edition. Guilford Press: New York.

Mindfulness

By Dr. David T. Weibel

Mindfulness broken down:

1. Observe my mind (sensations, images, thoughts, emotions)
2. Notice

Is my mind experiencing the present, or is it on the past or the future?

If my mind is on the past or future, ask:

Are these thoughts, feelings, or images serving or helping me?

If not...

3. Bring my mind back to the present moment and experience it fully.
4. Repeat steps 1-3 forever.

Mindfulness involves paying attention to the present moment with a non-judgmental and accepting awareness. It is simple. It is difficult. It is powerful. It is simple because children can do it. We have all done it. During the best moments of our lives, we were fully present. Mindfulness is difficult because we live in a mindless society, and our current brains have not evolved to catch up with hundreds of choices and thousands of bits of information per day. If you engage on a quest to be more mindful, you will likely have to remind yourself to do it 832 times per day for the rest of your life. Mindfulness is powerful because mindfulness is the most reliable way to step outside the battle of self-focused worry, anxiety, criticism, and depression. Mindfulness practice is also the path to experiencing simple pleasures, living with joy, and moving toward wisdom.

To cultivate mindfulness we will practice observing different objects of awareness. We can focus on different aspects of the breath: the rising and falling of the belly, the beginning of the breath at the tip of the nose, and the entire path of the breath. We can also focus on sensations in our bodies, whether relaxation, pressure from the floor or chair, the sensation of clothes or air on our skin, or even feelings of discomfort or pain. We will open to whatever is there, even if we typically would label the experience unpleasant and wish to change it or push it away. We can also mindfully walk, garden, play a sport, wash dishes, brush our teeth, or experience any moment of our lives. When we are mindless, focusing on past regrets or future worries, we can literally miss the moments of our lives. Thus, mindfulness is about reconnecting with and reclaiming the experience of living.

Inevitably you will find that your mind has drifted away from the current object of awareness. The essence of mindfulness practice is to notice when this has occurred, and then gently invite the mind back to what we are attending to now. To help explain mindlessness, imagine that you get in your car for a trip from Baton Rouge to New Orleans to see your favorite musician. You set out on the road with your route planned, eager for the pleasures ahead. However, after a few miles your car takes an exit you did not intend to take and begins heading west toward Texas. Before you even notice you find yourself crossing the Texas state line. Have any of your cars ever done that?

Of course not. It is preposterous. We control our cars. Do we not? It is rather easy for most of us, at least when not texting on our cell phones. Then why can we often not direct our brains or minds? Or even bring

awareness to what our minds are doing? Or why they are doing it? Here we are, supposedly the most advanced species on earth, and we cannot steer our minds as we steer our cars. This is a powerful and surprising discovery. We try to focus on a task and our minds drift into memories, regrets, fantasies, anxieties about upcoming deadlines, evaluations of how we are performing, guesses about how we are being perceived, or a thousand tangential thoughts.

Just recognizing that our minds have a mind of their own is a powerful realization. We may have previously noticed that our minds were bouncy, but it is not until we attempt to mindfully focus on one thing that we fully appreciate the nature of our mind, sometimes described as monkey mind (climbing, loud, mischievous) or bucking bronco mind (kicking, fierce, uncontrollable). Then, we can begin to relate to our mind and thoughts differently. When we notice that our mind has drifted off our current object of awareness, simply note that we have drifted into thinking. If we wish we can silently use a label such as ‘thinking’ to note that our mind has drifted into thinking. Later, as we become more familiar with our mental scripts, we might apply other gentle labels such as ‘judging’, ‘fantasy’, ‘inner critic’, ‘obsessing’, ‘jealous’, ‘angry’, or ‘regretful’ to denote that we have noticed our mind is up to its old tricks. Yet now we are the observer; we have a detachment from which we can see the mind’s patterns without becoming embroiled in them. We recognize thinking as thinking and elect to return to the present. The detached observer stance is the difference between the mental states of “I am angry” or “Arrrgghhhh!!” and “I am noticing that my mind is currently generating angry thoughts.” The latter detached stance provides more options. Noticing the nature of the mind, learning how it operates, and then realizing that we can redirect it where we want it to focus are powerful discoveries that benefit our lives.

Mindfulness involves an open-hearted curiosity into what is going on for us in the present. It can help us reconnect with all aspects of ourselves, which can improve self-understanding and help us make wise choices. By learning to attend to life in the present we can interrupt habitual cycles of worry, fear, and self-criticism, while coming to appreciate the simple pleasures of this life. The act of attending to our experience in an accepting and non-judgmental manner could also be thought of as an act of kindness or compassion toward ourselves. We attend to ourselves, listen to ourselves, and pay attention to our experience without getting caught up in self-evaluative processes about how we are doing. This also allows us to act more skillfully when dealing with others, which can help us help them.

We can remember to be kind with ourselves as we embark upon a mindfulness practice. It can be difficult, so we give ourselves a break and realize that if we attempt the practice, we are doing it. We are not interested in rankings or evaluations. If we remain in the present for 1 second out of ten minutes, then we experienced the present for that moment. Our ability to be mindful will always shift, even if we do this practice for years. Yet if we taste mindfulness, we will likely want to experience more of the moments of our lives.

Selected Mindfulness Books:

Wherever You Go, There You Are by Kabat-Zinn

Full Catastrophe Living by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life by Hayes

Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics by Dan Harris

For audio/video scripts to guide you, type in these search terms into Google or Youtube:

Kabat Zinn Guided Mindfulness Meditation

Sam Harris Mindfulness Meditation

Ohio University Guided Meditations Weibel

Eckhart Tolle Guided Meditation

Joseph Goldstein Guided Meditation Emotions

Apps: Headspace, Waking Up, 10% happier

Growth Mindset

Research by Carol Dweck

Fixed

Growth

**Talents,
Abilities,
Intelligence**

are static, set, unchanging.

can be developed



Leads to a desire to look smart
and therefore a tendency to....

Leads to a desire to learn
and therefore a tendency to....



Challenges

Avoid Challenges

Embrace challenges

Obstacles

Give up easily

Persist in the face of setbacks

Effort

See effort as fruitless or worse

See effort as the path to mastery

Criticism

Ignore useful negative feedback

Learn from criticism

**Success
of Others**

Feel threatened by the
success of others

Find lessons and inspiration
in the success of others



As a result, they may plateau early
and achieve less than their
full potential

As a result, they reach ever higher
levels of achievement