

The Power of Changing Your Thoughts

January - March 2012

by Liz Ashe, M.Ed., Director of Training WPS

Our world is full of change: mergers, layoffs, healthcare reform, inflation, illness, financial worries, etc. Dealing with challenging situations and people on a daily basis is commonplace. There are institutions that fail us, people who cause problems and many injustices exist in the world. Problems and situations that we did not want or expect will continue to surface in our lives. That is just the way that life works. However, it's not just the misfortunes or injustices that are hurtful to us; it's also how we react to them. How we react to life's trials and tribulations can have a profound effect on us and those around us. Victor Frankl, psychologist and Holocaust survivor saw this in himself and his fellow concentration camp inmates,

"The experiences in camp showed that a man does have a choice of action... everything can be taken away from a man but one thing... the last of the human freedoms... to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."
(*Man's Search for Meaning*)

This is a powerful idea. We can't always choose what happens to us but we can choose our reaction to what happens. According to Albert Ellis, (*Rational Emotive Self-Help Techniques and A New Guide to Rational Living*) people do not appreciate the impact of the mind on their reactions to events. Many of us think that our reactions are caused by events but it is often *thought(s) about events* that really cause our reaction.

Let's look at an example, let's say you are out in the park one day and a bird dropping falls on your shoulder. In and of itself, this is a neutral event--birds produce waste, gravity causes things to fall towards the ground, you happened to be walking on *that* patch of sidewalk etc. It may be unpleasant but the meaning we attach to this neutral event will determine how we react. So, if I say to myself *"I can't believe that happened to me... these things always happen to me!"* I might feel angry, sad or both and if I continue to think those thoughts I feel worse and worse and I carry that into my experiences and interactions the rest of the day. Not such a good day. Or if, in response to the same event, I say to myself, *"Huh! That is supposed to be a sign of good luck...maybe I will get that raise after all."* I may feel happy and hopeful.

And guess what? Regardless of whether I do get that raise, my day is pretty good.

It is common to blame people, events and things (like that low flying seagull!) for our feelings of anger, worry, frustration, fear, etc. But it isn't what is out there; it is what we do with it in our mind. It is easier to say *"He made me feel bad,"* than it is to take responsibility for our emotional states and admit that we may be impacting how we feel ourselves. It is normal, and quite adaptive, to use our minds to try to make sense of our world. However, sometimes our minds get in the way. Let's look at another example: A coworker says: *"I think there might be some problems with that report you gave me."*

| Possible Thoughts or Beliefs: | Emotional Response |
|--|------------------------|
| <i>"I probably screwed up... I can't seem to do anything right."</i> | Sadness, anger at self |
| <i>"She really has it out for me!"</i> | Anger, fear |
| <i>"She always has a problem with something."</i> | Disgust |

All of the above interpretations create negative feelings. Some people keep these thoughts and feelings to themselves --maybe they continue to concentrate on them for so long they feel worse and worse, something known as *intensification*. Emotions often impact behavior; causing you to snap at that co-worker or to slink off to your desk feeling so crummy about yourself that you don't join in on an office birthday party that afternoon. Our thoughts *do* have power. The good news is that you can change your thoughts.

The first step is learning to become more aware of how you think about things and the meanings you attach to them. So, let's say your initial thought to your co-worker's statement is *"I probably screwed up...I can't do anything right."* (our thoughts can sometimes be quite automatic). Okay, take a breath and try to think about it another way, --this is known as *reframing*.

Reframe: *“Hmm. I thought I was pretty thorough but maybe I did miss something in the report. Well, everyone does make mistakes... Hey, maybe I can learn something.”*

Looking at this situation from this perspective would have a different emotional and probably behavioral response. Let's try it with a different situation.

You're driving to work. Suddenly a man pulls out in front of you and slows down. You can't pass. You think, *“What an idiot! Can't he see how many cars are behind him? Why doesn't he pull over? I'm going to be late.”* Then you start having feelings of anger and frustration and you blame the driver. It may even lead to minor road rage. So as soon as you notice the thought, STOP! Use your mind to avoid the negative feelings and not let it get to you. Here's how it works.

Event: Driver cut me off and slowed down.

Automatic thoughts: I can't pass. I'm going to be late. What a jerk!

Re-set: Deep breath and say *“Stop. Be still. Relax. Cancel, cancel, cancel.”*

Reframe and Change Thoughts: *“Oh well. This isn't worth ruining my day. I'll get there when I can. Nothing terrible will happen if I am late. I'll just enjoy the scenery.”* If more negative thoughts creep in, distract yourself with something else.

Personal Power is the wisdom and ability to take charge of your mind. Negative thoughts are an energy drainer, stress producer, and can ruin your ability to function to the best of your capabilities. It can also affect your health. Very few people are all positive or all negative. We all have days when we would rather pull the covers over our heads, but regardless of circumstances, we have a great amount of control over our thoughts each and every day.

That's the power in changing your thoughts.

Is It a Stroke?

What everyone needs to know.

Sometimes symptoms of a stroke are difficult to identify. Unfortunately, lack of awareness spells disaster. The stroke victim may suffer brain damage when people nearby fail to recognize the symptoms of a stroke. Doctors say a bystander can recognize a stroke by asking three simple questions:

Ask the individual to **SMILE**.

Ask him or her to **RAISE BOTH ARMS**.

Ask the person to **SPEAK A SIMPLE SENTENCE**.

If he or she has trouble with any of these tasks, call 911 immediately and describe the symptoms to the dispatcher. According to the American Stroke Association, use of this test could result in prompt diagnosis and treatment of the stroke to prevent brain damage.

These techniques saved a woman's life. Her name was Susie. She had a massive stroke but because of the quickness of response, she recovered remarkably well. A friend saw Susie stumble and then she asked the three questions above. She failed all three and her friend called 911. Even though she had normal blood pressure readings and could converse somewhat with the paramedics, they took her to the hospital right away. Thankfully this quick action saved Susie's life.

Bust Your Blues with Music

In the Song of the South, a character sings Zip-A-Dee-Do-Dah. Some of the words, *“My-oh-my, what a wonderful day,”* may seem simplistic, but listening to happy songs can actually make you feel good. Music can help reduce stress by stimulating endorphins, the body's natural painkiller, and can also act as a distraction from dwelling too much on problems.

EAP Can Help!

Your EAP is a confidential, assessment, short-term counseling and referral program for you and your family members. It is a free benefit provided to you by your organization.

1.800.769.9819 ~ TTY dial 711 for TRS then dial 800.769.9819

Online Work/Life Services

If your organization offers Online Work/Life Services, visit our 24-hour internet resource for information, advice and support on a wide variety of issues. Contact your human resources department for a company code then check our Work/Life Services at www.affiliatedeap.com

