

Own Your Thoughts

Objective

Diminish the power your thoughts have over you by learning to separate your interpretation of your thoughts from the actual thoughts themselves.

You Should Know

Have you ever imagined yourself engaging in some unthinkable, inappropriate behavior: standing up and screaming in a classroom where everyone is silent or walking by a fire alarm and pulling it? This is completely normal. Everyone has thoughts that are weird, unpleasant, and even disturbing at times. Most people will quickly have the disturbing thought and then just as quickly forget about it.

Most people define these types of thoughts as “good” or “bad” and then judge themselves as possibly being good or bad people based on the positive or negative meaning they apply to the thought. And most people would be tempted to fight against the thought by controlling it or trying to stop it altogether.

If you have obsessive thoughts, you might have a different experience, in which you not only can't let the upsetting thought go but also find yourself attaching personal meaning to it, elevating it to the point where your obsession becomes entrenched. Trying to control a thought or stop it are strategies that do not help stop obsessions and most likely make them stronger.

Instead, learn to regard the thoughts clinically, as facts that can be explored to determine their worth in shaping your life. Practice categorizing your thoughts that bother you not as good or bad but as limiting or expanding your life, encouraging or discouraging you to thrive and prosper, or as simply being helpful or unhelpful to you.

What to Do

Create a thought interpretation notebook that will help you to

- recognize the power your thoughts have over you;
- separate your interpretation of your thoughts from the actual thoughts themselves, in order to diminish their power over you;
- judge your thoughts objectively to determine if they are healthy or harmful to you;
- reframe your thoughts so that they are more realistic and positive rather than negative.

To create your thought interpretation notebook, answer the following questions about each obsessive thought you have. You can use additional paper, if needed.

Obsessive thought:

What do I think my thought means to me? To my future?

How does this thought impact my life negatively or positively?

How do my negative thoughts make me feel about myself ?

How does the person I defined myself to be in the previous question compare to the person I know I really am?

If I look at my thought objectively, without any interpretation, how likely is it to come true?

If I did nothing about my thoughts, what realistically might or might not happen?

Thinking of my thought objectively, how could I reframe it in a more positive manner that is helpful to me?

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Put your thought interpretation notebook to work for you!

1. To instantly evaluate your thoughts, take at least two of the most helpful questions and recite your answer to them every time you have a disturbing thought. Continue for a two-week period.
2. Use a simple two-minute meditation.
 - Close your eyes.
 - Breathe deeply in and out.
 - Imagine a group of gnats buzzing around you. As they circle your head incessantly, realize that they are annoying but harmless and that you can deal with them.
 - Now picture your disturbing thoughts as if they are noisy bugs flying at a distance. You can hear them, but they are essentially in the background. Imagine yourself ignoring them, focusing on something else more important.
3. Even though it might not feel comfortable at first, add some uncertainty to your usual response to your obsessive thought by asking yourself, "What might happen if I didn't do anything about this?"
 - Allow at least five minutes to go by before you take any action.
 - Extend the time by an additional five minutes every time you have the thought, until perhaps you don't feel the need to respond as usual at all.

How did it feel to purposely separate your thoughts from your interpretation of those thoughts?

Did you feel as though the emotions you experienced enhanced or weakened the intensity of your interpretation of your thoughts?

What did your values tell you about yourself as opposed to the messages that your OCD-fueled thoughts give you about yourself? What would it look like if you interpreted your thoughts through that lens instead?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
