

Mindfully Addressing Afflictive Thoughts

Excerpt from Dr. Ronald Alexander's book, *Wise Mind, Open Mind: Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss, and Change* (New Harbinger Publications, 2009).

Cognitive behavioral therapy, also known as *cognitive therapy*, is a very effective approach to dealing with painful, afflictive thoughts, which are often based in habits of the mind and, upon examination, reveal themselves to be quite distorted and unwholesome. When these thoughts arise, you don't have to continue your narrative of suffering. Instead, you can stop, observe what you're thinking, and ask yourself, "Is this true?" You can consider the evidence that it is and weigh that against the evidence that it isn't, keeping in mind that extreme statements such as "I'll never..." or "It always happens that..." are almost certainly distortions. Using logic and reason, you can analyze a situation and determine whether you were assuming a worst-case scenario, and consider what the best-case scenario and even the most likely scenario are. This type of unemotional analysis provides perspective that allows for retraining the mind. You set aside the instantaneous, distorted, unwholesome thoughts and embrace more positive, wholesome ones, laying new neural pathways and building mindstrength. If you don't know whether a particular negative thought is likely to be true, you can explore the possibilities instead of being pessimistic and assuming the worst.

The next step in examining an unwholesome thought is to replace it with one that's wholesome. Working with a mindfulness trainer or a therapist can be very helpful for figuring out specific wholesome, remedying thoughts. You may choose to write out these replacement thoughts, which can be very effective. However, when you first begin using this remedy of a positive thought, feeling, or sensation, you're likely to feel resistance, as the old neural pathways in the brain protest, "But this isn't true!" One way to get around this obstacle is to design remedying thoughts that feel true

in the moment. Instead of trying to replace an unwholesome feeling of longing and emptiness with the belief, “I’m going to meet the love of my life very soon,” you can remedy that afflictive feeling with a thought such as “I’m doing all the right things to attract and create a healthy, loving partnership,” which is less likely to arouse feelings of dishonesty, discomfort, or embarrassment. The emotional response to this wholesome, remedying thought needs to be positive for it to take hold in the mind and body, and begin to lay a new neural pathway in the left-prefrontal cortex. Otherwise, you can achieve the opposite effect, creating even more negative thoughts and feelings instead of remedying the ones your mind has already churned up. In mindfulness training, the key is for the meditator to notice the direction of the mind flow in every moment and redirect it when it’s moving toward unwholesomeness. You actually teach the mind to create wholesome thoughts, and in so doing, you reprogram your brain, replacing old neural networks with new ones that foster creativity and optimism.

Once you’ve generated this positive and healing thought, you can make a point of saying the words silently or aloud every time you witness yourself thinking negatively. Let’s say you’re experiencing the recurring negative thought, “I’m no good with numbers, so I can’t go into business or handle my finances by myself without my late spouse to guide me.” First, you need to look at the evidence that you’re “no good with numbers.” It may be that higher-level math is difficult for you, but you’re comfortable with basic adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing. Look back to the source of that belief, examining your past: Were you good at math in high school but not at applying and using it in your personal life? Is there evidence that you have no aptitude for numbers, or does it simply feel that way because you never quite learned how to balance a checkbook? Is it possible that you can address this shortcoming? Perhaps you’re not good at organizing receipts and keeping track of spending, and not quite sure why your checkbook doesn’t always balance out. A few new skills and

the right software programs might do a lot to change your belief, “I’m no good with numbers.” You may simply need to notice that your mind is creating a negative loop of self-talk, comprised of self-defeating thoughts. By adopting the new, wholesome thought, “I’m fully capable of learning anything I wish to learn,” your mind flow will begin to shift and travel on a more wholesome course.

Because we shut down our creativity at an early age, often we become quickly convinced that if we don’t already know something, we can never learn it. The belief “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks” has been shown to be false, at least as far as brain science is concerned. The brain is far more malleable than ever thought. We can develop relationship, communication, and money-management skills. There may be many ways of solving problems and getting around roadblocks we haven’t thought about, from outsourcing to technology. Once we remedy our unwholesome and limiting beliefs, we open up to a greater range of possibilities accessible through open mind, the doorway to our deepest, or core, creativity.

Often, unwholesome, painful thoughts are about the past and the future, or cause and effect: You might think, “If I wasn’t able to do that in the past, I won’t be able to do that in the future” and “Because of what I did in the past, I can’t create the future situation I’d like.” Again, by applying mindfulness training, you open a doorway to a mindful-inquiry process in which you can examine these beliefs and let go of a sense of being stuck or trapped. Painful and fearful thoughts about the past and future will prevent you from focusing on the present, and accepting where you are at this moment in time. If you need to move to the West Coast in order to pursue your dream career, a thought such as “I’ve failed so many times in my life that I shouldn’t take this risk” or “I won’t be able to make it in such a highly competitive field” prevents you from looking clearly at where you are now and what you might need to do before making such a move. It may be that you’re fully capable of achieving your future goal, but if you can’t face your present situation with honesty and creativity, you

won't be able to remedy your unwholesome thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and move forward.

We can also have fearful thought patterns about the present that create obstacles that constrict and imprison us within the limitations of our unwholesome thoughts and feelings. Starbucks wouldn't exist if its corporate leaders had believed, "People don't like coffee enough to pay three-fifty for a cup of it" or "People only drink coffee from diners; they'd have no interest in a store that sells only coffee"—or, if later they'd thought, "People who love coffee don't want to buy tea" or "People who love music don't want a corporation recommending music to them." Such massively successful companies can't continue to exist if their creative leaders don't continually find new ways to compete in the marketplace. When we're able to experience expansiveness, we tap into an infinite number of possibilities.

Creative individuals have learned the habit of rejecting limiting, constrictive thinking. They allow the witnessing mind to arise, look at an obstacle, and say, "Perhaps that's true, but let's sit with that idea for a while." With mindfulness training, you'll find it natural to entertain the impossible and even the absurd. You can let go of the constricting belief that it's a waste of time to consider new ideas that seem unworkable or that have "already been done" and, instead, open up to new possibilities that reveal themselves. In Buddhism, we say that a constrictive quality of mind keeps mind flow within a narrow range of awareness, while mindfulness allows us to drop our limitations and ultimately enter the creative space of open mind.