



Healthy Minds Leaders' Notes



Aims

1. **Introduction:** Show that, as food affects our physical health, so what we think, affects both our physical and mental health and overall well-being.
2. **Identify** our self-talk; whatever goes round and round in our minds feeds 'thought trees'.
3. **Reprogramme:** What influences our thoughts? To see how memories, misunderstandings and self-image affect our feelings and how we can change that.
4. **Relaunch:** How can we keep our thoughts healthy? What spiritual help can we find?

Note: Positive thinking is not about ignoring real problems or pretending that everything is okay when there is a serious problem to be faced and worked through.

Some of these ideas comes within the scope of cognitive behaviour therapy. CBT can be helpful to all of us but it is not the answer to every form of depression. Christians can suffer from long term depression. It is a type of illness.

Self-talk

An old Cherokee told his grandson, "My son, there is a battle between two wolves inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, jealousy greed, resentment, inferiority, lies and ego. The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, empathy and truth."

The boy thought about it, and asked, "Grandfather, which wolf wins?"

The old man quietly replied, "The one you feed."

1. Introduction

Growing Thought Trees

Does what we eat affect our physical health? Certainly! In the same way, what we **think** affects our mental health. Our five senses feed information into our brain, particularly through our eyes and ears. The brains' chemicals and electrical impulses process the information into thoughts. In the video clip below Dr Caroline Leaf explains how thoughts and memories are made of neurons (nerve cells) and look like miniature trees with branches.

Dr Leaf | Anatomy of Thought Part 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dirU-zlYhho> 2 minute video clip

We all talk to ourselves. Research shows that most of us have around 1,300 words a minute or 30,000 thoughts a day racing through our brains. Some thoughts are gone in a flash. Others go round and round in our minds repeatedly. These are the ones that make us into who we are.

The more we choose to dwell on a thought, memory or problem, the more we feed that particular thought tree. Some trees will be positive, some negative and others neutral.

What we think can change the chemical composition of our brain cells and the rest of our central nervous system. Each type of thought, triggers certain chemicals. This will affect our mood,

attitude and health, both physically and mentally. Therefore what we think about has a significant effect on both our physical and mental health.

“Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

What are the effects of healthy thoughts?

- They help the brain to grow
- They help the nervous system to stay balance and healthy
- They strengthen white blood cells which fight off infections
- They help the digestive system work smoothly – good general health.
- They help us to feel like exercising which releases healthy chemicals
- They help us to maintain good mental health

What are the effects of toxic thoughts?

Bugs in the system! Have you ever had head lice? I have! Caught twice from my kids! I'm the expert on how to get rid of the things! Bugs in food cause food poisoning as we know. Toxic thoughts are like bugs that drain our strength and cause a wide range of illnesses both physical and mental. Fear, for example, can trigger over 1,400 physical and chemical responses, and activate over 30 hormones.

Finding a happy thought to help you isn't just a fairy tale thing as in Peter Pan or Harry Potter. It's about encouraging healthy 'thought trees' to grow in your brain and discouraging the thorn trees which harm us. Proverbs 17:22 tells us:

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit saps a person's strength.

We all experience the negative emotions of fear, guilt, shame and anger and sometimes they are necessary. Allowing these type of thoughts too much space can enable them to overwhelm our brains and make us ill either physically, mentally or both.

King Saul was someone whose mental health steadily deteriorated. It's unclear how it started. He had made some stupid decisions as king, such as when he commanded the army to fast when they were in the middle of a battle situation. (1 Samuel 14:24) After God told him that he had rejected him as king and would be appointing someone else, he really began to go downhill mentally. His imagination started to feed on negative thoughts. He became paranoid and imagined that other people, especially David were out to get him when they were not. He became unpredictable, unstable and neurotic. Not only did he try to kill David when he realized that David was God's choice as his successor, he even threw a spear at his own son Jonathan who was trying to reason with him concerning David. (1 Samuel 20:32-33)

2. Identify

What are you like in the mornings? Do you get out of bed 'on the wrong foot', or feeling that the world is against you? Or are you lovely until someone upsets you?

Even the best people have bad attitude days so don't be afraid to take responsibility for your attitude.

Picture your thoughts as miniature trees.

Ask – is this thought good for me? Is this a healthy tree or a poisonous/thorn tree or a mix?

Is it true or could it be a misunderstanding?

Decide whether to let this thought tree stay, grow, prune it or uproot it.

Whatever you decide to do with it will affect the neural circuitry of your brain. If you accept it your brain will grow more branches. If you reject it, it should disappear.

It is harder to do this with particularly difficult memories but let's focus on everyday ones for now

What influences our thoughts/self-talk?

1. Our memories and experiences
2. Misunderstandings
3. Our own self-image
4. What we see and hear every day

3a Memories

Downsizing: As we grow taller things get smaller!

“Miss Earthy – you’ve shrunk”, declared Jenny as she towered over her primary school teacher.

“This room has got smaller”, noted Trudi who was re-visiting her old church.

Perhaps read the end of ‘Alice in Wonderland’ where Alice grows bigger than the Queen of Hearts who is threatening her.

We sometimes need to shrink or re-adjust our memories. A problem or an experience that scared us when we were young may no longer hold the same threat for us. It is possible for an amputee to feel pain in a limb that is no longer there. We can sometimes change the way we see the past as our understanding grows of the world.

When Alex was 5, he was attacked by a peacock that pecked his face just below his eye. It was extremely frightening. Now that he is 6 foot tall, does he still need to be afraid of peacocks?

Maybe you had a frightening experience when you were young such as with an animal. Pray with someone that the Holy Spirit will heal this memory and re-size your fear.

Tricks: Memories can play tricks on us and we sometimes don’t remember correctly what actually happened. A girl named Janice remembered her mum being really mean and not letting her go on a trip to the beach with her friends that she had been looking forward to all summer. But years later when she checked the facts with her brother and mum, she found that it hadn’t happened that way at all. Her mum had reminded them both that the bus was due in 10 minutes and they needed to hurry in order to catch it. They didn’t listen to her and so they missed the bus.”¹

- Do you have any memories that need to be healed?
Some may only need a short simple prayer, others may need extra help.

¹ Retold from ‘Unlocking the Secrets of your Childhood Memories’ Leman & Carlson, page 134-5

3b Misunderstandings

*“The problem is not the problem.
The problem is your attitude about the problem.”*

Captain Jack Sparrow, Pirates of the Caribbean

Bethany’s friends said that they were planning to go shopping in town without her.

- How do you think she felt about that? Why?

Then they said ‘Hey – whose birthday is it in a couple of weeks’ time? Well it was hers!

- So how do you think she felt about it then? What made the difference?

If you think your friends are leaving you out of a shopping trip because they just don’t want you with them you will feel left out, unwanted or even rejected. If you believe they have not invited you because they are planning to buy you a birthday present you will feel the opposite.

Look at the bigger picture. Many problems are caused by misunderstandings.

Some people struggle with school assessments and so believe that they are stupid. This is a type of misunderstanding because there are many skills and qualities that school do not cover. Annette was a quiet girl who did not excel at academic work, sport, art or music. But if any one of Annette’s classmates needed a shoulder to cry on, they went to Annette. Many people who did not thrive at school go on to lead rewarding lives. Even Churchill was a ‘problem pupil’, repeatedly coming bottom of his class and with an appalling record for timekeeping and discipline. ‘He has no ambition,’ his headmaster wrote.

*“Everybody is a genius.
But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree,
it will spend its whole life believing that it is stupid.”* Attributed to Einstein

At home, your Mum or Dad may be short tempered with you some days. Maybe you have upset them, but it could be because they feel unwell or are worried about something. Sometimes when parents divorce, their children mistakenly believe that it’s their fault. **It never is.**

Ask yourself:

- Have I misunderstood something?
- Is there another way, more positive way of looking at this?
- What is the ‘bigger picture’ here?

3c Our self-image

Many ideas are circulated about things such as our body image. If we believe for example that we have to be the ‘perfect weight’ to feel happy, we will always be unhappy. Why? And who has the right to say how we should look? Whoever it is has power over us so we should decide carefully!

Simon had been bullied at primary school and despised himself as a ‘wimp’ until one day someone said ‘you have a good heart’, because he was always doing things for people. It was a revelation. He had been basing his self-image on the lies of bullies. He was able to change the way he thought about himself.²

² Adapted from an article by Jane Firbank

Suggested Antidotes to harmful self-talk

How could you complete these thoughts in a positive way?

1. I would likebut ...
2. I don't likebut ...
3. It's okay to make mistakes because ...
4. I'm different to other people which is ...

Think of some appropriate antidotes for your own toxic thoughts.

4 Relaunch: How can we keep our thoughts healthy?

- “Guard the gates of your mind – your eyes and your ears”, my youth leader often told us. Be careful what you see and hear. Of course it's impossible to go through life without seeing and hearing some things that aren't good for us. But we can make good choices where we can and we can choose which thoughts to keep replaying in our heads. If we do social media, we can select carefully who we follow. Some people have very uplifting posts.
 - Is there anything you need to read or watch less?
 - Is there anything helpful you could read or watch more?
- Bigger picture: Look for a 'bigger picture' to dispel misunderstandings. When people are stressed, the first thing to go is kindness. If someone is mean to you, it may not be about you. They may have a huge problem you know nothing about.
- Box of treasures: Have some positive sources to feed from such as a box of treasures with items and words that have good memories or encouragements. Identify some key positive quotes such as Bible verses to help you keep your self-talk healthy.
- Choose your own attitudes, don't just react to others.

Writer Sydney Harris tells a story about being with a friend who was buying a newspaper from a newsstand. The newsman was grumpy and extremely rude. Harris' friend responded with a smile and politely wished the man a nice week-end.

As the two friends walked down the street, Harris asked:

“Does he always treat you so rudely?”

“Yes, unfortunately he does.”

“And are you always so polite and friendly to him?”

“Yes, I am”

“Why are you so nice to him when he is so unfriendly to you?”

“Because I don't want **him** to decide how **I'm** going to act.”³

³ Why am I afraid to tell you who I am? John Powell

“Attitude is a choice: no one forces you to think, feel or behave the way you do. We can choose to develop a negative critical attitude which makes it difficult for us to enjoy life and also makes us difficult to live with. Or we can choose to develop a positive attitude towards God and others and to look for the best in people.” Pastor Adeyemi

Let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Ephesians 4:23

- Forgiving people and praying about things that hurt us as they arise. Proverbs 17:9
- Good social media if you use it. Recommend some sites/people if appropriate.

What Spiritual Help Can We Find?

The idea that what we think has a powerful effect on us has been in the Bible for centuries. Proverbs 4:23 in the Youth Bible/ NCV simply says

“Be careful what you think because your thoughts run your life”

A deeper translation would be:

“Most important of all, be careful what you dwell on in your heart, because it is the control centre of your personality.”

The Bible’s recipe for good mental health

My child, pay attention to what I say.

Listen closely to my words.

Don't let them out of your sight.

Keep them in your heart.

They are the **key to life** for those who find them;
they **bring health to your whole body.**

Above everything else, guard your heart.

It is where your life comes from.

Don't speak with twisted words. Keep evil talk away from your lips.

Keep your eyes focused on what is right, ignore all sideshow distractions.

Proverbs 4:20-27 (from NLT, NIV and the Message)

Read: find some short punchy quotes that you can use as healthy ‘snacks’ for your mind.

Listen: Have some favourite music ready to play, something that will calm or cheer you.

Pray: Ask God to

1. Heal any painful or difficult memories that you have
2. Take away your fears
3. Help you to see your true value
4. Help you to understand what triggers your negative thoughts.
5. Help you not to keep thinking thoughts that harm you
6. Ask him to fill you with his Holy Spirit.
7. Trust him – he is building your character and can use everything to help you grow.

When things do go wrong ask God to bring good out of them. Cow dung is a smelly waste product but it also fertilizes the soil

Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Romans 12:2

Cast down harmful imaginations... 2 Corinthians 10:5

“As the waves crash against the rocks so negative thoughts pound against the shoreline of our personality eroding our sense of worth.” Liz Babbs

Sources and further information

CWR seminar notes

Telling Yourself the Truth: Backus and Chapian

Unlocking the Secrets of your Childhood Memories: Leman & Carlson,

‘Why am I afraid to tell you who I am? John Powell page 38

Healing for Damaged Emotions: David Seamands

Healing of Memories: David Seamands

Web site resource: ‘School Reports Get Outdated’

Credits

Writer: Brenda Lord

Image: Pixabay

Bible verses from: NCV = New Century Version (Youth Bible); NLT = New Living Translation; NIV = New International Version; The Message by Eugene Peterson