

Thinkology:

The Study of Thinking About Thinking



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INTRODUCTION

Growing up, I had a recurring dream about flying. It was a progressive dream where each time I dreamt it, I got closer to my goal of lifting off the ground, without any machine, and flying through the air. For years, I would dream that I was starting to fly, but as soon as I thought about the fact that I was lifting off the ground, I would come down to earth. I'd start to fly, get excited, and come back down. Next dream, I'd get a little higher, get excited, tell myself to relax, go a little higher, start thinking about what I was doing and how I shouldn't be able to fly, and I'd come back down. Every single time I had the dream, I would hear a voice in my head saying, "Don't think so hard and you can fly." As I got older, I realized that this was the message of my life. It's the message I have struggled to follow, and also the message I feel I am supposed to share. Several years ago, I felt the need to write it down – thinking that "maybe if I do this, I'll find some solution, or maybe even closure, and move on to a new message." So, I wrote a story about the dreams: "Don't Think So Hard and You Can Fly." And, while it felt good to get it out there, that message still reverberates loudly in my psyche. It's still the number one message I need to follow, and, frankly, that got me thinking....

I got my first job at the age of 11, and so, over the years, I have worked in a wide variety of jobs and with a wide variety of people. When I look at success – no matter how you define it, the people who are successful think differently. They aren't necessarily the smartest or the most creative. They don't always have the highest IQ, EQ

or any other Q! The people who truly create a successful life for themselves are the ones who think “soft” “pliable” “flexible” thoughts – they find that sweet spot between thinking things through and letting things go. They don’t get hung up on “what ifs” and instead focus on “what can be.” And, most of all, they control their thinking so that they aren’t obsessing over anything, and they turn negative thoughts into positive ones that then create successful actions.

I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about thinking... My hope is that this book will help you create a more positive life by controlling the ONE thing that is ALL yours – your thoughts. When you think about it, our thoughts create our world so, why not try to think in a way that makes our world more fulfilling?

I can’t promise this book will solve all your problems, but it will provide you with some food for thought.

Who Taught You To Think?

Now, thinking is easy, right? We do it naturally every single moment of every single day. Even when we're sleeping, some part of our brain is thinking. So, who taught you to think? Anyone? Did anyone ever sit down with you and tell you "This is a healthy process for thinking. Anytime you think, do it this way"? Probably not. It's just assumed that we know what we're doing, even as babies! Sure, we're taught how to read, write, do math, build a home, use a computer, write a book... but no one taught us how to think in a way that would be most helpful and effective in getting through life. As a result, we have a LOT of people walking around who are simply thinking... well, wrong! Now, this is NOT a political or social comment about people's opinions – that's a whole different train of thought. But, let's think about it for a minute – where do our thoughts come from?

I am not a neurologist so I won't even begin to try to explain the neural complexities of how we form thoughts. One thing is certain, though, our thoughts are not "real" They are not concrete. And while they do matter, they are not matter. Instead, they are malleable, like clay. We can turn them into whatever we want, but there's a process we should at least attempt to follow to ensure our thoughts don't run our lives. First, need to decide what we want, and then use our thoughts as guides. We need to check what we are thinking to make

sure we understand why they're there and where they're coming from. And, it's helpful to ask ourselves questions so we don't assume that what we think is real. In fact, we need to be open to the fact that what we think may be totally wrong. Our brain may be fooling us. It often is – we just need to figure out what is true/not true and WHY we believe what we do.

What and how we think comes from the sum of our experiences. That sum is heavily influenced by the sum of experiences of our parents, grandparents, family members, teachers, friends, and other people we spend time with. In some cases, what we think may be exactly what our parents told us when we were young. Or, maybe some thoughts are based on what we learned in school, at work, or through books, the media, or movies. Every experience we've ever had helps form the way we think about EVERYTHING. How we see the world, ourselves, others, what we like and dislike – all these thoughts come from our life experiences.

Then, through us, all these sums of experiences manifest in our brain, and come out through our words and actions. We manipulate them to fit in with our individual circumstances and create a world for ourselves that feels comfortable to us. But, they are still just thoughts, and after ALL that influence, they are likely wrong. Which means much of how we see the world, and ourselves, is not accurate for anyone else. Our existence is custom-crafted – no two are identical.

Our ego – a thought-based program in itself – tells us what we think is right. Only when we step back and are open to learn can we see that we are probably wrong more often than right. But, nobody wants to take such a hard blow to their ego all the time! So, we have to go slow as we make the transition from thinking hard to

thinking soft and flexible.

With that in mind, it's easy to see how our general thought patterns can propel us upward or send us spinning downward, without us giving it a second thought.

What and how you think also affects every aspect of your life, so learning how to think in a constructive manner could be really helpful in building a happier, healthier, more productive and successful life.

What You Think Becomes Who You Are

Thinking is REALLY easy – everyone does it!

But, thinking the wrong things or in the wrong way can be bad for us, especially when we get obsessively focused on them, because they can affect how we feel internally, as well as how we behave externally. Our thoughts affect how we feel, whether angry, sad, stressed, or even elated, in love, or lustful.

Maybe you assume you know what others think and feel. You might assign their emotions, imagine conversations with them, and decide what they would say and how they feel towards you. You may even imagine it obsessively, assigning slightly different words, gestures, and outcomes until you are satisfied with your thoughts – or just plain exhausted by them.

But, it can be problematic when you spend too much time thinking about the wrong things such as:

- Conversations you HAD
- Conversations and scenarios you imagine - when they get obsessive or are negative they become toxic
- Thoughts about yourself – same as above
- Worry about what others think and do, what you did wrong, or what can go wrong

- Judgment of others and yourself

Essentially, anytime you start obsessively thinking about things that are negative you start a toxic cycle that can be all-encompassing. Even if your thoughts aren't "very" negative, the recurring low-grade pessimism can make you feel like your thoughts reflect real-life, when, they are actually just thoughts you've created and may have nothing at all to do with reality. This ongoing practice can:

- Be exhausting
- Affect your mood
- Affect your productivity
- Create anger
- Create depression
- Make you difficult to be around – have trouble with relationships
- Stop you from achieving your short and long-term goals
- Negatively affect how you see the world around you

Sometimes, it's not even about thinking negatively, it's about focusing on the wrong things at the wrong time. Obsessing over your son's grades when you're at work isn't going to produce better grades for him or help you complete your tasks at hand. Replaying the fight you had with a co-worker isn't going to resolve any differently now that you are at home making dinner. All you're doing is creating more angst within yourself, increasing your feelings of stress and overwhelm, and probably making the situation worse – at least in your mind.

Now, yes, there are times when it may help to look at the “negatives.” And we must be able to learn from them, adjust how we respond to them, and how to avoid them. So, it’s not that we should never think negatively – that would be impossible and, frankly, create someone very annoying to be around! It’s about creating a balanced thought process that limits the energy put into negative thoughts and moves them forward to a place of being positive, productive, and enriching to our lives.

It’s not easy. Like all healthy habits, It takes on-going practice. In fact, I don’t think it is something we can “achieve” and then, voila, we have it mastered and think perfectly for ever and ever. Some days will be easier than others. Some moments we’ll be at the top of our game, other moments we’ll be deep in a spinning cycle of negativity. But, it’s far better to try to tame our mind than to let it run rampant like a charging elephant in the jungle.

Don’t Think So Hard

The revolving door

I used to have a marketing client who was a business and life coach. His whole purpose was to help people get their business or life in order, make progress, and be successful. He was really good at seeing where businesses were spinning their wheels and being ineffective, and he helped many individuals work through their “schtuff” to lead happier, more productive lives. However, he himself was stuck in a revolving door.

The first time we met, he said he wanted to build his business by offering some new educational and service programs. So, we created a plan based on the program he had in mind, and then scheduled a meeting a week later to review the steps we needed to take in order to get the program off the ground. When we met, he came to the meeting with an outline for a completely different program that he thought would be even better. So, I went back to my office and re-worked the plan and marketing messages, timeline – all that stuff. His homework was to create a detailed outline of the actual training he was offering – which wasn’t going to be hard to do because he was just updating a program he used previously. Two weeks later, we met again to review our progress. He came to the meeting with a pile of papers. Some items were pieces he had created previously; others were articles he found online. He didn’t have an outline, though, because he had spent all his time reviewing his old files and researching. So, we looked through his pile of paperwork and identified which items were relevant

and helpful. He promised he would email me the outline in a few days, and we set a meeting for the following week to continue the planning process. Do you know what happened? He never sent the email with the outline, but he came to the meeting with a new program he wanted to offer instead.

For many people, all this thinking gives us an excuse to be stuck. This re-thinking, re-working pattern is probably one of the most common roadblocks of over-thinkers. It has been my personal nemesis all my life. Thinking and re-thinking things as we tell ourselves and others we are “fine-tuning” or learning more before we put our plans in action. This thinking becomes a busyness that halts our productivity, and that eventually undermines our self-esteem when we don’t seem to ever move in the direction we want to go. We blame ourselves, when really, it’s just our thoughts getting in the way – we are perfectly capable of accomplishing our goals if we would stop thinking so hard.

And, while researching, rewriting, and thinking things through IS important, there’s a point where it becomes that revolving door that never stops. You just keep going around and around... you might get out of the chute for a minute, but the next thing you know, you’re going around and around again!

So, why does this happen? Why do we get caught up in this cycle where we’re actively busy doing things that at least seem productive, but we’re never actually moving forward? I have a theory - it’s due to a fear of failure, a fear of success, or a general lack of confidence. Sure, there may be some people who believe they can’t help but obsess, but outside of a true chemical imbalance, many revolving door thoughts can be traced back to a perceived need for perfection. And, that is often a sign

of low self-confidence. (I can say this because I am not a scientist or counselor who needs to be careful of my language. And, frankly, I can look in the mirror and recognize the resemblance in my theory.)

So, how do you break out of the revolving door? I wish I could give you a simple little 3-step process that would work perfectly. But the reality is, building self-confidence is not always easy. In fact, I don't think it's ever easy. While I DO have ideas (and, of course research) on how to build self-esteem, in the interest of time and productivity, we can't dig into the root of the problem right now. Instead, let's dig just beneath the surface of what makes our thoughts spin. Let's look at fear.

Whether you have a fear of failure or success, they're pretty much the same thing because in either case you really don't want to put yourself out there. You don't want to take the chance of being ridiculed, embarrassed, or shamed. You don't want to do it wrong. You want everything lined up perfectly before you step out, and that makes sense because if you step out at the wrong time, you may hit a wall. It's much safer to keep going around and around. But, aren't you tired or spinning around and never getting anywhere? And, if you've been in that revolving door for a long time, you probably haven't made a lot of progress, and THAT leads to those same feelings of embarrassment and shame you've been trying to avoid.

Here is what I've learned along the way that has helped me step out of the chute – nothing is perfect. Ever. And, the only way to create something truly great is to make mistakes and learn from them. Thomas Edison said “I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work.”

While it's important to do your due diligence and at least start with a solid foundation, it's more important to take joy in the process of building and learning and improving – and, you can't do that until you put your program and yourself out there. A friend of mine was an Executive Coach who gained a lot of notoriety by publishing a book. One day, I overheard one of her colleagues saying she could have written that book, and she could be offering those services and trainings. And, yes, she could. But the difference was my friend, the coach, didn't spin around and around over-thinking in the name of perfection. She put herself out there with the idea that she would fine-tune things as she went along. And, that's exactly what she's done!

So, how can you take some initial steps that will help you out of the revolving door? Here's some homework:

Take a hard look at what you're telling yourself about that program, project, or goal you're trying to achieve but are stuck on. Let's take inventory.

- What happens if you put it out there and it fails – how will your life change?
- What happens if you put it out there and it succeeds – how will your life change?
- What fears come up when you think about these circumstances?
- How do you feel about your current progress, or lack thereof?
- Where do those feelings come from? How were they formed? Why do you feel that way?

Recognizing how we feel about a situation is a great first step in resolving inner conflicts that are getting in our way. (And, ALL conflicts are inner conflicts.)

- Can you change how you think about “failing” and instead take good ol’ Tom’s view and use each failure as research that will lead you to success?
- Set a timeline for each step you need to complete in order to accomplish your goal. Even if what you put together for that step is not 100% perfect, get it done and move on to the next step. Get out of the chute.

What's Your Flightplan?

I have to be very careful when I tell people not to think too much because some people really don't think enough, and yes, some don't seem to think at all! For me, personally, I LOVE thinking! I really do and always have. Let me learn and research and think of all the different angles and... But, obviously, I have found that thinking too much can get in the way of progress. However, not thinking enough can be just as bad.

Throughout my career, I have done a lot of work with small businesses and non-profits. I like the idea of helping someone create a successful organization and watching them grow. But I have seen numerous companies crash and burn before they ever got off the ground because they didn't think things through.

Most business owners start by knowing what service or product they want to offer. They often think about how they will deliver it, where they will work, maybe even how much money they want to make. But I have found that the smaller the business, the less likely they are to spend time thinking about who they are and what their company is really about. Many small business owners don't feel they need to go through the process of writing a Mission or Vision Statement. They don't identify the Core Values of their organization, and they don't identify their real target market so they can attract like-minded customers, clients, or partners through effective marketing.

Not thinking enough about who you are, where you want to go, and how you want to get there can hold you back from achieving success just as much as thinking too much. It is incredibly common for many people to wake up one day, often in their 50s or 60s, and realize they are not at all where they thought they would be at this stage in their life. We get caught up in the daily grind of life, and kind of think we know where we're going. But, if you don't have a flight plan and a map, you're probably not going to end up where think you're headed.

When my partner and I packed up our dog, my office, and the clothes, gadgets, and tools we would need to do "The Great Loop" aboard our 40' trawler, we had countless maps, regional books, two GPS systems, two cellphones, one tablet, and two computers. We also had a basic itinerary of where we wanted to go, when we expected to get there, and what we wanted to see along the way. Our plans were flexible, as you have to be patient and flexible when you're on the water, but we knew where we were headed. I can honestly say, the time, thought, and energy that went into planning that trip was more than what I did when I started my own business, and probably more than what most people spend in planning out their life.

I encourage people of all ages to really think about what they want in this life.

- Write down some goals. Maybe include what you want to do next year, or down the road when you retire.
- Perhaps you have goals for your family – what you want to teach your kids, experiences you want them to have, places you want them to see.
- And, make sure you include some financial goals and plans, too. How much do you want to put aside for college, vacations, retirement? How much debt do you

feel comfortable carrying? What kind of work will you need to do to accomplish your financial goals? Can your current career get you there, or do you need a side gig?

I believe in utilizing Stephen R. Covey's idea of "Start with the end in mind" and then work backwards to chart your course so you can safely land on the right runway. Doing this helps ensure you are striving to accomplish the things that truly motivate and inspire you, and that helps keep you moving forward in the right direction.

THINK ABOUT IT> Think about where you want to go, and then work backwards from there.

Thinking changes everything

It has taken me a while to really get to the true meaning of that recurring dream about flying, but I THINK I've got it: Our thoughts affect our emotions. Our emotions affect our behaviors. Our behaviors affect our success. So, our thoughts affect our success.

Now, success is very subjective. For some it may be about having lots of money, for others, success may be having a healthy family. For most everyone, success equates to being happy. But, it's not always easy to be happy when the world around you seems to be falling apart. For just a moment, think about the things that can affect your happiness on a daily basis:

- Health and diseases
- Politics
- Social upheavals and injustices
- Work/boss/colleagues
- Spouse/partner/friend relationships
- Family issues
- Finances

Now, when you're really honest with yourself, how many of these things do you truly have any kind of real control over? Can you stop diseases from happening? Other than voting or running for office, can you change the political system? Can you change the actions, attitudes, and responses of the people in your life? What can you do to improve your financial situation and why haven't you done it yet?

The reality is that we have very little control of most of life's challenges. SO many of the things that stress us out the most are outside our circle of influence, and that can make things even more stressful, especially if you're one of those people who feels the need to try and control it all.

"Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

There is so much serenity that comes when you let go of the things you can't control and take responsibility for what you can. And, when you really get down to it, the number one thing you have control over, and which can make the biggest impact in your life, are your thoughts.

In spite of the fact that we exist in physical bodies here on earth, a great deal of our lives happen only in our thoughts. The inside of our mind is where we spend most of our time – both waking and sleeping – so, it's important that we try to make it a comfy, cozy place to be. One that helps us get through the rough times rather than making them harder.

THINK ABOUT IT> How much time do you spend thinking about things outside of your control?

Thinking Smart, Feeling Good

Henry Ford said, “Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t, you’re right.”

Thinking - how and what we think - defines everything else in our lives. Your thoughts are the single most important aspect of your life and the number one determinant for whether or not you will achieve your goals. Our thoughts dictate how we feel, how we act, and how we interact in the world.

So, what are you thinking? Are you thinking you can accomplish anything you set your mind to? Or, are you thinking that only applies to everyone else? Are you thinking that guy at the office is a total jerk and next time he insults you you’re going to tell him where to go and how to get there? Or, are you thinking that guy at the office must have some sad situations in his life that are affecting his behaviors? Are you mad because the rain caused a tree to crash across the road and now you’re stuck in traffic, or are you happy the tree didn’t fall on you?

Being happy or optimistic isn’t something that comes naturally to most people. In fact, while I’ve met one or two people who seem to just be naturally upbeat, most people are working to find that happiness. But, it’s hard,

maybe impossible, to feel positive emotions when you're thinking negative thoughts. Believe me, I know firsthand. Our thoughts control our emotions. If you don't believe me, try this:

Think of a really happy memory, or of a place where you felt calm and peaceful. Think about it for 90 seconds and really put yourself in that place. Identify the sounds, smells, and temperature. See the faces of the people you love there and imagine everyone happy and smiling including you. Bask in that thought as deeply as you can. When the time is up, how do you feel? What emotions are you feeling? Are you smiling? Do you feel relaxed or tense?

Now, think about something negative. Maybe you'll think about the fight you had with your spouse, your brother, or your boss. Or, the lady that cut you off on the highway. Spend 90 seconds thinking about the scenario and what happened, what was said, what you wanted to say, what you wanted to do. How do you feel now? Are your shoulders tense? Eyebrows furled? Do you want to hit something? (Before reading further, go back to the happy exercise and do that again....!)

The impact of our thoughts on our emotions is ridiculously obvious now, isn't it? Our thoughts can make us feel everything – happy, angry, sad, fearful, excited, loving.... So, think about your thoughts on an average day. How much time do you spend thinking about negative things that were done or said to you, or the problems in the world, or the potential problems that may arise (worry)? How many times have you replayed that fight with your co-worker, or imagined yourself, again and again, finally having the courage to tell off your boss? And, what are your thoughts about YOU? Do you think nice things about yourself even when you make a

mistake? Or, are you repeatedly kicking yourself for all the things you've done "wrong?" Those negative thoughts can take their toll on your mood, relationships, and even your health, so now is a good time to change your way of thinking and start thinking smart.

When I talk about "thinking smart," I am referring to thinking in a manner that is good for you, one that helps keep you stable, calm, and positive. To me, that's a much smarter way to think than if I were to think in a way that made me angry, sad, or stressed all the time. So, how do we do that? How do we think smart? Practice thinking positive.

The "positive thinking practice" (PTP) is an on-going exercise – it never ends because you can never get too good at it. The good news is, you have an unlimited opportunity to practice! The positive thinking practice is based on the same basic framework used to help people overcome an addiction where they replace a negative habit with a positive one. I used this technique to help me move past a conflict with a family member. I was driving myself crazy because every time I thought about him, I replayed the last interaction where voices were raised and insults, accusations, and outright lies were hurled. The instant replay in my brain seemed to be on a continuous loop, and that kept my anger up and my productivity low. Eventually, I hit a point where I consciously decided I didn't want to think and feel that way. Instead of repeating the fight over and over again, and feeling all the emotions that went along with it, I decided to do something good for myself and change my thinking. I made a pact with myself that anytime my thoughts started down that quarreling path, I would stop them and instead think of positive ways I could improve my business. In this practice, I stopped thinking about a negative situation which I could not change, and instead

focused on positive opportunities I could implement that would benefit me.

This shift from negative thinking to positive is a game changer. I have to admit, while I believe in the power of positivity, I've always leaned more towards "the glass is half empty" in my thoughts. Changing things around to stop myself from allowing the negative loop to run my life is part of the process that has me typing all this right now! And, if I can do it, anyone can. It starts by paying attention to what you're feeling and thinking and making a commitment to keep the negative thoughts to a minimum. Every negative situation, real or in your head, can be re-framed into something positive. Now, granted, some days you just won't have the energy to make the switch – it's often easier to stay in a negative mode. Give yourself a set amount of time to feel those adverse emotions and then put your re-frame script in place.

THINK ABOUT IT> What will your positive, re-frame script be? In other words, what positive, productive thoughts will you focus on instead of the negative spins that prohibit you from moving forward?

Your thoughts become your actions

Here's an additional benefit of re-framing - it creates positive actions/reactions so you are better able to regulate your behavior. When you replace the negative thoughts with positive ones, you don't stew in your anger and frustration and are therefore less likely to mishandle interactions with the people around you.

I don't know if you've heard the "don't kick the dog" story, but it goes something like this:

A man wakes up one morning and finds his refrigerator stopped working, so all his food has spoiled and he doesn't get his breakfast. As a result, he goes to work hungry and grumpy. When he gets to work, he yells at his administrative assistant because he can't find the report he was working on. Even though it's not her fault, the assistant, who was having a good day until that point, gets upset. She starts frantically looking through the computer files for the report, but then her computer freezes up. She calls the IT guy and yells at him to "fix this hunk of junk or else!" The IT guy glares at her and swears under his breath, but gets everything running and back to normal by the end of the day. He goes home, still fuming about being yelled at in front of the whole office. When he opens the door, his dog, Barkley, is excited to see him and jumps up on him, making him drop

everything he was carrying. Angry about work and unable to accurately see the love and loyalty his dog was giving, he takes out his anger on Barkley. And Barkley slinks off to hide under the bed.

Bottom line, if anyone along the line had taken some time to reframe their thoughts, the cycle would have stopped, the IT guy wouldn't have arrived home angry, and Barkley wouldn't have had to take the heat.

The more negative thoughts we think, the more negative the life around us. And when it feels like life is repeatedly slapping you in the face, at some point, you're going to want to hit back. That hit may be directed at your boss, co-worker, spouse, kids, dog, or maybe yourself.

Conversely, when the majority of our thoughts are positive, we, too, become more positive. And, positivity attracts people. Those kind, loving, optimistic, thoughts usually create a person who is helpful, encouraging, supportive, and empathetic. These "soft skills" are exactly what companies are looking for, and what happy families are made of. The more positively you think, the more positively you act, and the more positive experiences you'll have.

After her dad died, my friend went through a real rough patch and started seeing a grief counselor who suggested she keep a daily joy journal. At first, it was a real challenge because she wasn't really feeling any joy. Still, every night, she would list three things that brought her even the smallest bit of joy during the day, and try not to repeat anything she had written previously. She started to find herself looking for these bits of joy as she went through her regular day so that she would have something to write. As time went on, it became easier and easier to make her list. She found more and more

things to be joyful about, and her whole attitude began to shift. The more she looked for joy, the more joy she experienced, and the more joy she experienced, the more of it she shared with others. Can you imagine what our world would be like if everyone focused on finding joy throughout the day, and reframed their thoughts when needed?

Could it be that our thinking creates our world? Definitely!

THINK ABOUT IT> What will you do to think more about positive things than negative?

Gloom, despair, and agony on me

One memory that always brings a smile to my face comes from my pre-teen years when I would watch Hee Haw with my dad. I loved watching those guys sitting there in blue jean overalls with their milk jugs singing “gloom, despair, and agony on me.” Fortunately, their gloom was funny, but that’s not the case for much of the TV, radio, and Internet content these days. Today, we can be bombarded with negative information 24/7 depending on what channel is on, and this can have a negative impact on our thoughts.

The sounds we hear get absorbed into our psyche whether we realize it or not. For instance, if you need to get pumped up for a meeting or a presentation so that you’re feeling good and telling yourself “You got this!” what better song than Eye of the Tiger? Listen to that and pay attention to what you’re thinking and how you’re feeling after a couple rounds. (I also like Rachel Platten’s Fight song, and Katy Perry’s Roar to help get me thinking strong.)

On the flip side, if you listen to sad or angry songs for a while, you’re likely to start thinking sad or angry thoughts as your brain connects to the sounds it’s processing. So, it’s no surprise to me that people who watch a lot of scary

movies, or listen to heavy, angry music are often angry, depressed, anxious, and negative. How can you think positively when all the “voices” around you are saying negative things?

Just like our bodies need healthy foods with vitamins and minerals to keep us strong and healthy, our brains need healthy messages to keep us happy and balanced. So, I encourage you to tune-in to more healthy messages, and minimize negative thought influencers. For me, that means I listen to positive podcasts, watch a lot of Hallmark movies, and often have a “Yacht Rock” station playing when I’m going through my day. This helps keep me from getting too wrapped up in the plethora of negatives out there and keeps my thoughts on a more positive track.

THINK ABOUT IT> Take a minute and do an audit of your thought influencers. Look at all the TV shows where people are arguing; count the number of times the news reports on murders, catastrophes, and misfortunes; and see what kind of information is coming to your social media feeds. How much of the sites and sounds around you encourage positive thoughts? What are you feeding your ears and eyes?

**Thinking Smart,
Thinking Easy**

So, how do we think Smart and Easy?

Ironically, the key to stop thinking so hard is to think differently.

- Stop the thought process going on in your head
- Recognize that they are just thoughts and they may be (are likely) wrong
- Try to identify where your thoughts originate (mom/ dad, other experiences)

Recognizing this takes away some of the power or imperfect thinking. Think of the people you learned from – were they perfect? No. So, maybe what they taught you isn't perfect either. At the very least, recognize that your thoughts are not entirely your own – they are seeds planted by others, you just grew them.

One of the very best ways to start changing your thinking is to get to know yourself. Self-awareness is the very first step in making any positive change because it focuses on identifying and understanding your emotions and your reactions. When we dig deep into how and why we think the way we do, it gives us a great starting point to help us change how we think, how we act/react, and how we interact.

There's been a lot of talk and writing on Emotional Intelligence (EQ/EI) and how it affects our relationships at work, home, and with ourselves. Most EQ experts say there are five components of emotional Intelligence: Self-awareness, Self-regulation, Motivation, Social-awareness, and Social-regulation. To improve our level of proficiency in each of these components requires us to first be willing to do the work of looking at ourselves, and then doing the work of changing how we think and act.

I've been working in and on emotional intelligence since 2012 and have seen dramatic, positive changes in people when they start developing their self-awareness. Using a scientifically developed assessment, you can learn which components of EQ are your strongest/weakest, as well as how your behaviors and motivators affect your work and home life. This provides a foundation from which to start changing your thinking so that you can change your actions, which, in turn, helps create a more positive life. And it all starts with THINKING.

So, even though it's unlikely anyone ever taught you how to think, you can learn how to do that at any point in your life - there is no time limit. If you're ready to start a practice of thinking smart:

1. Start by paying attention to your thoughts. What are you thinking about? How much of what you think is negative? How much do you obsess, worry, judge? Is your self-talk positive or negative? How many of your thoughts filled with anger, jealousy, or sadness?

2. Shift your thoughts. You may need to completely change your train of thought and focus on something positive. Try engaging in an activity to stop your thoughts and redirect your energy such as visiting with friends, singing a song, working out, gardening, or meditating.

Get your mind off the negatives by doing something different from your usual activities.

3. Surround yourself with positives. TV, movies, music, art, and especially people. Put yourself on a positive-thought diet where you are taking in more good than bad.

4. Dig deeper into where your thoughts come from. Know yourself, recognize how you formed some of the ideas you have about yourself and life. Try to identify and understand the root of your emotions.

5. Don't think so hard. Sometimes, you may need a break from thinking. Take time to just BE and not think. Let go of the things you can't control and don't obsess over anything for too long. BREATHE.

So, what do you think?

What are you going to do with your thoughts now? How are you going to start thinking in a more constructive, productive way? Where will you start? Which negative thought patterns are most prevalent during your day? What positive thoughts will you use to reframe the negative ones? What do you think will be your biggest hurdle in changing your thinking process? (Hint: your thoughts!) What will you gain if you start thinking smart? (Another hint: A happier, healthier life!)

I will tell you right now, changing my thinking patterns is one of the hardest skills I have had to learn, but also one of the most rewarding. I will also tell you that I practice it everyday, and somedays I do better than others. But, that's ok, because trying IS a form of success when it comes to reframing your thoughts. We've all seen the plethora of "Think positive" messages on the Internet that

make it sound so simplistic. It's not easy, but it IS life-changing. In fact, it will change your world. Pay attention and study your thinking habits because when you master your thoughts, you master your world.

Most of all remember: All thinking all starts in ***your*** mind

Who taught you to think? Anyone? Did anyone ever sit down with you and tell you “This is a healthy process for thinking. Anytime you think, do it this way?”

