

Please Try This at Home

Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

The Freedom of Self Doubt

Ever seen that bumper sticker that says: *Don't believe everything you think?* Or that quote: *Don't take yourself too seriously; no one else does?* I've been thinking about these quotes recently in light of some things I'm learning about the brain. On one hand, I'm amazed at the brain's ability to synthesize information and come up with assessments of situations that keep us alive and help us grow. As I work with hurting people and continue to mine the depths of my own thinking, though, I'm becoming more and more aware of ways in which our own minds fail to tell us the truth.

It seems like most people can critically evaluate messages that come from others. After all, we live in a world of advertising with fine-print at the bottom, Ponzi schemes, email spam that promises fortunes if we'll only hand over our bank info, and a growing line of significant others who hurt us or go back on their promises. In the school of hard knocks, we've learned how to ask penetrating questions about what we hear from other people and then to fall back on our own judgment for a final assessment about what we think is going on in a situation or inside of us.

Often, though, we do not ask the same penetrating questions of our own judgment that we ask of others'. We assume our thinking is solid and accurate because it *feels* that way to us. We are used to it, so it feels normal, which feels *right*. We often miss the fact that *whatever* thought patterns get repeated in our brains will eventually feel normal. That includes repeated inaccuracies in the ways we think about the world and ourselves.

How our brains lie to us

Repeated errors in the ways we think come from a variety of places. Genetically, some of us have areas of over- or under-activity in the brain that consistently fit a "lens" over our perception of experiences. These lenses incline us to view whatever we encounter in a particular, limited way. Abnormal activity in certain brain sectors produces an anxious lens where everything we encounter feels like a threat to avoid; or a muted lens, where nothing feels engaging or worth the effort; or an aggressive lens, where everything needs to be fought; or a depressive lens, where everything we encounter proves that we are worthless and that hope for change is foolish.*

Even if our brains start out genetically normal, past repeated or traumatic experiences can create thought pattern tendencies related to certain experiences. When we encounter a future experience that in any way reminds us of past ones, we're much more likely to think about the new experience as we did in the past, even if the situation is not exactly the same. With a thought pattern tendency in place, it's much harder to consider other possibilities or alternative points of view that would be valid in the present circumstance.

For example, say we once dated a musician with "brilliant prospects" and no day job. After she borrowed money from us and didn't pay for the umpteenth time, the following brain pattern solidified: musician = financial instability = feeling used = pain = never again. Then we meet

another musician who happens to have good business sense. Despite the difference in her personality and savings account, it will be much harder for us to give her a chance because simply the word “musician” triggers the thought that ends in “pain” and “never again.”

If we totally rely on our own thinking in this case, we’ll never be able to give another musician a chance. Our *thought/feeling* about musicians is not telling us the whole truth that some musicians, like some accountants, or grocers, etc. are bad with money and take advantage of people and some are good with money and take care of people. Our thinking here feels like absolute truth because it has been painfully ingrained, but it is not the *whole* truth. It is partly a lie.

What happens when we don’t question our own lies

While bypassing the musicians in the dating pool might not be a big deal, other lies people tell themselves are a *huge* deal. Here are some I have heard people tell themselves, just in the past few months:

- My situation is absolutely hopeless; there is nothing I can do.
- Anything bad that I do is part of who I am because I am a bad person; anything good I do doesn’t count because it is just what anyone else would do.
- I am not the type of person who other people could value; I’m the type they use.
- The way I feel right now is the way I will always feel.
- If I share my real self with others, they will take advantage of me.
- I have to be upbeat all the time or I won’t have any friends.
- Since I don’t earn as much money as my friends do, I am worthless.

Looking into another’s thought patterns from the outside, it’s not hard to see that these are half-truths, half-lies. Some situations *are* totally hopeless, but usually there is something that can be done, even if it’s just a shift in perspective. If the bad things people do “count” as being part of their character, the good things should also count. Some people aren’t trustworthy with others’ real feelings, but other people are. Some people need their friends to be upbeat all the time; others want the whole range of emotions. Some people evaluate others on the amount of money they make, but not everyone; worth comes from a wide range of sources.

But can you imagine how difficult it would be to see the world from an accurate, balanced perspective if these lies are what the mind focuses on 24/7 without questioning? Can you imagine what behaviors might follow from leaving these lies unquestioned? If they were absolutely true, as we often believe our thoughts to be, it would make sense to stop trying to make things better; to isolate or commit suicide to rid the world of such a “bad” or “worthless” or “terminally sad” person; to never be real with or get support from others; to never demand that significant others treat us with respect. Horrible consequences can follow from taking ourselves too seriously and genuinely believing whatever we think because it feels normal and therefore right!

Freeing ourselves from our thoughts

Since we can’t really trust ourselves *or* others, does that mean we’re destined for ruin? Hardly. It just means we need to apply to ourselves the same degree of questioning and consideration of other sources that we do to others. If other people say they have a great deal for us, or that they think we are awful (if they happen to be our 15-year-old), we consider other sources. We ask

around to see what other deals are out there. We consult with our spouses or friends to ask, “Am I really awful?” We do the work to get a more accurate, balanced picture.

The trick with ourselves, though, is *deciding to believe the other sources*, knowing that what feels normal to us about the deepest, most hidden parts of ourselves will not necessarily be the absolute truth. Sometimes others see us better than we see ourselves because of our biased genetic and experiential “lenses.” Here’s a way to start:

1. List the beliefs you have about yourself or the circumstances in your life that feel shameful, troublesome, or that make you feel stuck.
2. Among the list, note any that are extreme (implying all, never, ever, always, only, etc.) or that predict the future in ways you cannot absolutely prove.
3. For these extreme or future-predicting thoughts, write down what is probably a more balanced perspective that could be verified by other sources. For example, a more balanced perspective on “I have always been a bad person” would be “Sometimes I do things that I don’t approve of.” For a future-predicting belief like “I will never be a good student,” a balanced, provable perspective would be “Right now, I feel unable to get the grades I’d like.”
4. Show the people in your life who know you best and are most trustworthy all or part of your list. Ask them what they believe to be true about you in each of these areas. How would they argue with the beliefs you have about yourself and circumstances?
5. Whenever you notice your shameful or troublesome thoughts going through your mind, effortfully and consistently remind yourself what a balanced, accurate perspective would be and what other trusted people believe about you in these areas.
6. Doggedly keep doing this for a long time until it feels natural. Patterns that took years to create will take a long time to change. It takes consistent practice—usually 40 days or more—for something new to start feeling normal.
7. Begin to enjoy the freedom that comes from not believing everything you think!

Thanks for reading!

*See *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life: The Breakthrough Program for Conquering Anxiety, Depression, Obsessiveness, Anger, and Impulsiveness* (1999) by Daniel Amen.

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