

Stinkin' Thinkin'

While recently vacationing in Kerrville, Texas we visited the Western Museum of Art, an impressive collection of paintings, sculpture, and artifacts commemorating our pioneer ancestors. In their gift shop, we purchased a book, Western Movie: Wit and Wisdom, authored by Jim Kane.

The Western Wit and Wisdom reminded me of our wonderful human capacity to view a half glass of water as either half-full or half-empty. Some of us seem to stay very positive, some very negative, while most of us probably vacillate between the two extremes. Actually, the latest behavioral research explains our tendency toward negativity or caution as resulting from our evolutionary ancestors' efforts to survive in dangerous settings. There certainly is ample validity to have appropriate levels of cautiousness.

Two prominent Cognitive-Behavioral Therapists, Dr. Aaron Beck and Dr. David D. Burns have identified common patterns of thinking that often constitute the underlying basis for our being stressed-out, anxious or depressed. They use the sophisticated term, "Cognitive Distortions" to label these negative habits or patterns of thinking. In Alcoholics Anonymous, they use the vernacular "Stinkin' Thinkin'"! Let's explore the eleven common Cognitive Distortions.

Before we do, I must mention the critical/pivotal variable of awareness. We can't change what we don't notice or recognize. It's very easy to employ Cognitive Distortions without realizing it. Taking the time for self-reflection, self-examination, or requesting feedback from others, is generally necessary for self-awareness to grow and our evolutionary development to proceed. Here we go!

- **All or Nothing Thinking**: Things or people are all good or all bad. This is black and white thinking. There is no gray or common ground. Generally, most of us can see the fallacy of this stance if someone gently points it out to us. If we all adhered to this, we'd have 100% divorce rate rather than our current 50% rate. Examples of this position are endless in our personal lives, nationally and internationally. For example, "I'll never get the job I want!"
- **Overgeneralization**: One negative experience occurs and we quickly move to extreme thinking such as "No one likes me," or "I never have a great vacation." Think like this and you're bound to be depressed, anxious, stressed-out or all three!
- **Mental Filter**: We all make our own reality. One bad thing happens like a negative interaction with someone and we stay with a negative filter. This is similar to overgeneralization above. "No one ever calls me!"
- **Disqualifying the Positive**: Most of us have trouble accepting compliments, praise or love at some time. We tend to push it away or aside by self-deprecation such as, "Anyone would have done it." "It was no big deal!" Some of us have learned to simply say "Thank you" even though it might feel a bit uncomfortable.
- **Overemphasizing the Negative**: These folks are usually very stuck in their negative view of life. Constantly challenging the negative assertion is often

necessary. It's very tiring. Negativity does seem to attract negativity. The glass of water is half empty.

- **Jumping to Conclusions**: I call this "mind-reading." Psychotherapists or counselors do this a lot with their clients. They assume they know what is motivating their client without having any factual basis. We need to secure facts and discard the fantasy assumptions that come into our minds. When someone is upset, our automatic thought might be, "They are upset with me!"
- **Magnification and/or Minimization**: This one amazes me! Our human tendency is to magnify and fixate on the negative while minimizing and quickly ignoring/forgetting a positive event. This frequently occurs in work settings where an employer's enlightened policies and deeds are overlooked but any misstep is kept forever alive, never to be forgotten.
- **Emotional Reasoning**: This occurs when our negative thinking and feelings are so ingrained in us that they are in fact us. Unless we have a profound transformative experience, we stay encapsulated in a prison of negativity. This can occur due to social class or racial identity. With feelings of inferiority, my negative belief or self-talk might be, "I'm not as good as others." With our children and grandchildren it's wise to guide them toward objective appraisals and accurate assessments of themselves and others.
- **"Shoulda, Woulda, Coulda" Statements**: This is a rigid, pervasive pattern of believing that nothing you do is good enough. You chronically second guess yourself and say, "I should have, could have or would have done better if I had done it differently." This is the opposite of self-acceptance, which flows out of self-love.
- **Labeling**: This is similar to "All or Nothing Thinking," in that the label we apply to ourselves or another is so absolute. We say, "I am so lazy," or "He is so controlling," instead of "Sometimes I have low energy" or "Under stress he can become dictatorial at times."
- **Personalization**: I guess most of us do this occasionally. We take things personally. We misinterpret words, facial expressions or behaviors that may have nothing to do with how we are perceived by others. Sometimes we take personalization to an extreme level where we enter into self-blame. For example, "If I had been a better parent, my child would have graduated from college."

How Do We Cease "Stinkin Thinkin"?

Here are some important steps:

1. Be still and listen. Take the time to tune into your thoughts and feelings. Record in a journal.
2. Change negative beliefs and self-talk to positive. Repeat until you believe it and you change your self-identity.
3. Sometimes we need to escape a negative environment or person. Remember, "Life is too short to dance with ugly men or women!"
4. Reflect and ask yourself these questions: Is this thought or belief true? Did I jump to a conclusion? What evidence for the thought or belief do I have? Am I letting negative thoughts balloon out of

proportion? Is there another, more realistic way to view the situation? What would be the worst that could happen? Does it help me to think this way? What would be the best that could happen?"

5. Choose to decide how to deal with the source of your stress (Don't "try"; instead, be powerful and "decide.") Ask yourself: "How else can I think about this? What could I do to cope more effectively with this situation? How could I view this more positively and more accurately?" These restructuring thoughts should be practiced until they become automatic when facing stressful situations.

This doesn't mean ignoring reality or putting a false happy face on unpleasant situations. However, it is often possible to focus on the positive side of a situation just as easily as on the negative side. You can acknowledge a painful truth while still understanding that there are positive aspects to the bigger picture. Stamp out "Stinkin Thinkin"!

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