

3. Cognitive Restructuring

The process of identifying errant thought(s) is one that, once initiated, continues forever. It is a constant process of discovery. It never ceases to amaze me how many errant thoughts one can detect. Just when you thought you have heard them all, another one pops up that has never been detected. I have been at this for 15+ years and still find new errant thoughts on a fairly regular basis.

The next step in the process is to restructure the errant thoughts. This is literally the process of developing a *new* thought that directly neutralizes the errant thought. While this may sound easy initially, it can be a bit tricky. Many of my clients have a bit of difficulty with this step. I will often hear the comment: I know what I am thinking, and I know it is not good, but I don't know what I *should be* thinking.

This is really not surprising. We have not been trained in this process and it seems a bit peculiar at first to answer the question: What should I be thinking? Many clients, once they have discovered the errant thought, want to answer the question: Why am I thinking that way? It seems, I suppose, that if one had the answer to 'Why do I think that way?' one might be closer to 'not' thinking that way, but actually they are not. The vital question to be answered is: *What should I be thinking instead?*

To illustrate this concept, allow me to paint a real scenario from my own life. My wife and I built our home 10 years ago. At the time we were considering whether we wanted to save some money for a lake cottage or spend the money in our mortgage to put an in-ground pool and create an 'oasis' of sorts in our own back yard. With our busy lives, and having 6 kids between us, we opted for the pool in the yard. It has been a great investment. We have gotten tons of use out of the pool and we have had many pool parties. Over the years our home has become the 'gathering spot' if you will for our rather large extended family. It seems now that most birthday parties, mother/father's day celebrations, etc. happen at our home. I really am quite happy about our home being a comfortable place to celebrate, but I am not going to lie - sometimes the *resentment* starts to creep in.

Not long ago we were hosting a birthday party for my father-in-law's 85th birthday. Per usual, my wife and I bought all of the burgers, food, beer, etc. which can get a bit expensive. We do the grocery shopping before-hand, get the home and yard ready for company, entertain all day and then clean up after everyone has gone home. My nieces and nephews (and their spouses) are in their mid-20's, they have kids of their own kids as well. So the pool is usually filled with kids on one end, young adults on the other, having a blast. My father/mother in law thoroughly enjoy themselves, sitting on the deck watching their, kids, grandkids and great grandkids frolic in the pool.

What do I do? I sweat my butt off, cooking burgers, keeping beer cold, entertaining - making sure everyone else is having a great time. This is where the resentment can start to creep in. On this particular day I was flipping burgers, watching a pool-full of people have a great time, and thinking to myself - Why the heck do I always have to be the one working my butt off while everyone else gets to play and enjoy? The more I thought about it the more resentment I felt: They (the 20somethings) hardly ever say thank you to me. They never say: Hey, thanks for opening your

home, buying all the food and beer, keeping us fed, hydrated and entertained, doing all the shopping before-hand, cooking during, clean up afterward. We come, play, eat, drink and go home. We so appreciate all that you do!! Nope, haven't heard that one yet.

So there I was, on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, in my backyard, entertaining family and I was beginning to feel resentment. This is where I have to stop and ask myself: Miles, what do you *want to be feeling instead?* Of course I would much rather be feeling happy, content, at peace, excited about my day. So *what do I need to be thinking* if I want to feel those things?

At this point I had options. I could have just let it build, all afternoon and all evening, until everybody has gone home and I am pissed off, picking up empty beer cans and paper plates. I could just 'try not to think about' resentment (yeah we all know how well that works - not very). Or I could take a moment to *restructure* my thoughts, right in the moment, and really make something happen.

Option 3 is what I chose to do. Right then and there, sitting by the pool in a lounge, I took out my cell phone and began texting some 'restructured' messages to self. Keeping in mind that I wanted to feel peace, contentment and excitement, I thought about thoughts that would *need to be in my brain* to feel that way:

- Miles, this is about a birthday party for your father in law - this is not about you.
- Look at how happy he is watching is kids, grandkids and great grandkids swim in the pool.
- Everyone is thankful for what you are doing, even if they don't say a thing.
- Stay in the moment.
- Stop counting, start enjoying.
- Look at the beautiful day, the kids frolicking in the pool, the sunshine.
- It doesn't get any better than this.
- Be thankful for all you do have - that you can enjoy this afternoon with your family.
- Think of all the people in this world who are not having the privilege of doing what you are privileged to be doing right now.
 - Those who have no home.
 - Those who have no job.
 - Those who are sick and lying in hospital beds.
 - Those who are depressed.
 - Those who are mentally ill.
- Be thankful you have the money, the home, the time, the good health (both physical and mental), to be able to do the things you are doing right now.
- Giving of yourself to others is a source of great joy and peace.
- Someday you will be 85, on the side of the pool and they will be cooking for you.

I probably could have gone on texting to myself for a good long while, but this only took me about 10 minutes, tops. During the time that I was texting these messages an amazing thing was happening deep inside of my brain. The thoughts themselves were producing large amounts of serotonin and dopamine in my brain. The cortisol, adrenaline and epinephrine that were being produced as the 'resentment' was building, began to dissipate. I started to 'feel' the way I wanted to feel. The thoughts I was creating and texting to myself were literally changing my brain chemistry to a positive profile. The more I texted, the better I felt - immediately.

But that wasn't all. Even when I was done texting these positive messages to myself, my brain continued to maintain the positive chemical profile that I had created. Now, incoming thoughts were being channeled down the brain circuitry I had *just been firing* to continue creating more positive chemistry. It was as if my brain had gotten its 'fix' of positive chemistry and I was 'high' on positive thoughts. In reality, this is exactly what was happening.

There are only a limited number of ways to change brain chemistry. I can change chemistry by adding certain chemicals to the mix that are known to cause the brain to release larger amounts of serotonin and/or dopamine. The most popular of these chemicals are alcohol and marijuana. Less popular are cocaine, meth-amphetamines and opiates. Some activities can change this chemistry: sex and eating are popular. And then there is *thought itself*. **Thought** is by far the most efficient and convenient. It has been scientifically proven, over and over, that *thought itself changes brain chemistry*, swiftly and efficiently. By using my phone to text these thoughts, I was taking thought itself and amplifying it by at least a factor of 10.

It would have been good to simply think my preferred thoughts, but it is literally 10 times better to write these preferred thoughts. The reason for such is simple, the act of making a thought into a sentence of some kind (written/typed/texted) requires that the brain engage all 4 lobes of the cerebral cortex; the frontal lobe for motor processing, parietal lobe for sensory processing, occipital lobe for visual processing and temporal lobe for language processing.

When I texted those thoughts into my phone, I lit up an area in my brain like a Christmas Tree that houses circuits that support my positive thoughts about things. Of course the fact that I have done this many times before, thus building much of this circuitry in my brain, helps me to 'light up' this area rather easily and keep it 'lit' for a long period of time. I literally 'shifted gears' in my brain from resentment to contentment.

But first I had to **actually create** the 'gear' of contentment to shift into. Had I not spent the time to create the circuitry that houses my contentment thoughts, I would not have been able to shift it quite so easily into 'contentment' and keep it there for the whole afternoon. The building of the circuit in my brain that houses the thinking that leads to contentment has literally been built one text at a time and I have been building it for years. Each time I stop to type/write/text out my preferred thoughts, I make this circuit stronger. *This is the art of cognitive restructuring.*

My brain stayed 'lit' with positive, contentment-bearing thoughts for the duration of the afternoon and throughout the evening. When my company left (most of whom, by the way, said nothing to me about being thankful for everything I had provided - per usual) I cheerfully went about the business of picking up the backyard and basking in the contentment of my own thinking - all from a 10 minute 'text-to-self'. And if you don't believe me, you are going to just have to try it for yourself.

So how do we put this process together? It begins with integrating step one, **meta-cognition**, with step two, **restructuring**. For me it usually begins with the *recognition of a negative feeling*. In the example here it started for me in the form of *recognizing a feeling of resentment building in my*

system. At the point of recognition I had to stop and actually 'do' something. I sat down, pulled out my phone, and began texting all of the neutralizing thoughts I could come up with.

Now granted, I have had a lot of practice doing this. It isn't always so easy to come up with neutralizing thoughts immediately. But, following my example, we can begin to practice formulating positive thoughts. This is where the coaching comes in. It is not something that can be learned by simply reading a book. Sure, you could learn the basics from reading some material, but the result would be akin to how good you might get at baseball from just reading a book and not having a coach. A coach's function is to help a player do it correctly and consistently correctly.

Furthermore, by texting/typing these thoughts over the years I have been able to keep them and use them again and again. I have built a virtual 'library' of positive thoughts that I keep right in my phone. Ah, the wonders of technology. With my smart phone I can store hundreds of positive thoughts that are always at my finger tips. I can email thoughts, organize them, and keep them in a database for easy retrieval. I am no computer genius by any means. A simple Word Document can be used as a database. I text them to my email account, clip them out and paste them into a Word Document. Each thought, or set of thoughts, gets a label. For example, the above mentioned thoughts I would label 'resentment'. When I am looking for thoughts that I need to neutralize resentment I simply open the Word Document, click on the find function (the binoculars icon on the 'home' tool bar in Microsoft Word) and I can type in the word resentment. It will take me to each recording of the word resentment in the entire document as I toggle through by hitting 'enter' or the 'find next' box. This is a simple but effective way for even the most computer illiterate folks to create a database of 'preferred thoughts'.

Every human being is unique. We may have some negative 'types' of thoughts in common, for example a universal fear of failure, but each person has a *unique configuration of negative thoughts*. Thus each person requires a unique, *custom-built library* of 'replacement' thoughts or 'preferred' thoughts.

I often have people say to me things like: "Oh, I get it, you are trying to teach me to think positive thoughts." Yes, essentially, but it is so incredibly more complex than just assembling some random list of positive thoughts. I recently spoke with a client who was discussing some of his previous experiences with therapy. He was one who initially had the: "I have already tried that ... and it doesn't work" attitude. When I pressed him for details, his former therapist had taught him to think about something positive when he started to feel anxious - 'being on a boat, out on the ocean, or a beach, basking in the sunshine'. Good advice?? Maybe so, but not really anything close to what I am talking about here. Random 'happy' thoughts are better than nothing, for sure, but relatively weak compared to the *construction of preferred thoughts* that are *custom-designed to directly neutralize and replace the actual existing errant thoughts - BIG DIFFERENCE!*

Nor is this some form of 'The Secret', a popular, bastardized version of the **Law of Attraction** that posits the notion that 'We can think into being anything we want.' So if I want a 'million dollar house' if I think about it enough I will eventually get it. Again, is it better to think I will get a million dollar house than to think I won't? Of course, I can't argue with that. Thinking I will get a million dollar house certainly increases the probability of such over thinking it cannot ever happen. But let me be clear, 'the secret' is not even close to the art of cognitive restructuring.

Cognitive restructuring deals with the fine art of *identifying specific, personal, unique thought processes that produce specific emotions and editing them to create specific, personal, unique thought processes that produces preferred emotions*. It is a process and an art. Though it may sound simple it really isn't, it is every bit as difficult as learning to speak a new language and speak it fluently.

I have grown to despise the word '*journaling*'. At first, I liked the word, but over the years I have discovered that the word itself sends many people in the wrong direction - especially those who have '*journalled*' before. I prefer to use the phrase *cognitive-restructuring* or *cognitive editing*. For many, journaling was taught the '*cathartic*' way. *Catharsis* was the idea that unwanted thoughts could be purged from the system by writing them down to 'get them out'. Thus, folks were encouraged to journal their thoughts as they appeared in the mind. Turns out, this is dead wrong. Writing only reinforces, thus I should avoid writing the thoughts that I don't want to be having. I have had clients literally burst into tears when they realize that for years they have been writing down all of the negative crap in their heads, desperately trying to purge it from the system, only to feel worse in the end. Cathartic journaling is particularly diabolical due to the fact that it 'appears' to create a good feeling initially. This is really only due to the 'placebo effect' produced by believing it is going to help. Neuro-biologically, it cannot help to purge only to reinforce. Thus, the initial 'good feeling' eventually gives way to feeling 'even worse' once the effect has worn off.

Cognitive Restructuring is the lynch-pin of Cognitive Strategy. It takes quite a bit of training, practice and discipline to master, but it is well worth the effort. It is not something that can be learned in a day. In most cases, 8-10 sessions is the minimum I would recommend to fully engage the process. From there, the practice can take months to perfect. Like a beginning artist, there is a certain amount of time and effort required to get to the level of making a painting look like something recognizable to someone else. The more one paints, the better one gets at the technique and over the months and years the quality of painting just keeps getting better. Cognitive restructuring is really no different, we are using the same brain, the same neuro-circuitry, to construct skill, style and technique - similar among artists, but unique to the individual - that continues to get better with training and practice.