

Stress Bytes Newsletter

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“WHEN STRESS BITES, BITE BACK!”

THE NEWSLETTER OF ANNETTE VAILLANCOURT, PH.D.
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Don't Believe Everything You Think

This is my favorite bumper sticker – “Don't believe everything you think.” It reminds me that a lot of our misery, depression, anxiety and interpersonal difficulties are caused by our death grip on assumptions that make us miserable. When we act as if what we think is true without checking them against reality, we often times make more trouble for ourselves in the process. As a colleague wisely said, “if you are going to assume things, why not assume things that are favorable to you instead of things that upset you?” Easier said than done

For example, if your spouse comes home in a bad mood, instead of assuming you must have done something to upset them, why not assume that their mood has entirely nothing to do with you? Then your behavior would go from walking on eggshells to providing a listening ear for them to vent. You're likely to find out the truth of the situation is nothing like you assumed.

Unfortunately, most of us DO believe everything we think. We make assumptions, we jump to conclusions, and we interpret other's behavior from within our own framework. We haven't yet learned that our minds are just a constant stream of thought and impressions that

we can either attach energy to and take too seriously or just let flow by like scenery outside the window of a passing train. Or better yet, get off the train of thought and just let it go by, simply noting, “hey, there goes that train of thought again” instead of riding that train of thought to its upsetting or erroneous conclusion. Easier said than done, but possible. These deceptively simple techniques can be applied to a wide variety of problems.

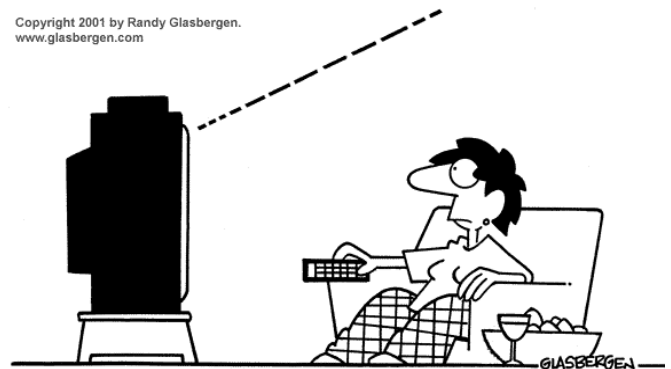
First you have to become aware that you believe everything you think. The key to this is usually a feeling of upset or restlessness about a situation or feelings of guilt, low self-esteem, anxiety, or depression. A simple exercise to learn where your mind goes and to become aware of its constant chatter is to close your eyes, relax and focus on your breathing. Then try counting 10 in breaths and 10 out breaths without your mind wandering. Unless you're a very experienced meditator, you will inevitably find yourself thinking about something and losing count and awareness of your attention to your breathing. When you do, simply notice where your mind went and return your focus gently to the breath. What you might start to notice is where your mind goes and how strongly you are attached to those

thoughts. Then you will see how you believe everything you think.

Attaching too much importance to certain kinds of thoughts is the sine qua non of anxiety disorders and depression. It's as if by repeatedly focusing on certain types of thoughts we've worn a rut in our brain, such that when anything triggers an upset our mind goes right to the familiar, well-worn path.

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“Our regular program will not be seen tonight because you're probably preoccupied with stressful thoughts about work and not paying attention anyway.”

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You can learn to wear a different rut in your brain or just let the other one disappear after awhile from disuse when you just notice a thought, then take the energy away from it.

This is where it's helpful to learn to either just notice the thought or to strive to become an "I-don't-know-it-all." Trying assuming your thought are just thoughts, NOT reality and take a stance of gently bemusement at what you find yourself thinking.

For example, early in my career and right out of graduate school, I found myself having a very distressing thought in the morning when I was preparing for work. The thought was, "I DON'T want to go to work!!" It was quite insistent, so I gave it a lot of energy and generated other thoughts that increased my distress, such as "what's the matter with me? Why am I feeling this way? Am I just lazy?" It was all the more distressing because it wasn't true. I did want to go to work. In fact, I loved my work. So, I learned to simply detach from this thought and note it, so that the next time that it appeared, insisting, "I DON'T want to go to work!" I simply said to myself, "Well, hello little thought. Here you are again. I guess you're just my signal that it's morning!" After awhile that insistent thought disappeared because I didn't give it any energy. I guess it's true that way you feed grows and what you don't feed fades away.

OPTIMISTS LIVE LONGER

OPTIMISTS GET THE LAST LAUGH, ACCORDING TO A NEW STUDY THAT SHOWS THEIR HEARTS STAY HEALTHY LONGER THAN THOSE OF GRUMPS.

PEOPLE WHO DESCRIBED THEMSELVES AS HIGHLY OPTIMISTIC A DECADE AGO HAD LOWER RATES OF DEATH FROM CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE AND LOWER OVERALL DEATH RATES THAN STRONG PESSIMISTS, THE RESEARCH FOUND.

OPTIMISTIC PARTICIPANTS HAD A 55 PERCENT LOWER RISK OF DEATH FROM ALL CAUSES AND 23 PERCENT LOWER RISK OF DEATH FROM HEART FAILURE.



**"Welcome to the Ego Repair Hotline!
Press 1 for 'Hey, you look great today!'
Press 2 for 'How did you get to be so smart?'
Press 3 for 'I wish I was more like you!'"**

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Awareness of Negative Self Talk

All of us are inclined toward some patterns of internal dialogue, or self-talk that increase our level of stress. Rate each of the following by using the scale listed below. Think of several situations that are quite stressful for you and then rate the degree to which each internal dialogue pattern occurs in these situations.

Stressful Situation #1 _____

1—Never occurs

2—Occurs occasionally but not that often

3—Occurs a significant amount of the time

4—Occurs almost all the time in stressful situations

___ 1. “What if” thinking—Letting your mind race into the future and anticipating many potential problems, regardless of how likely they are to occur and/or whether you can do anything to avoid them.

___ 2. Catastrophizing — In your mind, building something that has happened or might happen into a far bigger problem than it actually is.

___ 3. Selective attention to the negative — Thinking about only the negative aspects of what has happened or could happen and disregarding information that is potentially positive.

___ 4. Setting perfectionistic self-expectations and goals—Setting goals and expectations of yourself that are rigidly high and unrealistic. (Using should, ought to and must excessively.)

___ 5. Perfectionistic self-blame—Lambasting yourself unmercifully when something goes wrong vs. realistically and objectively taking stock of what could be done differently.

___ 6. Perfectionistic blame of others—Lambasting others unmercifully (in your mind or outwardly) when something goes wrong vs. realistically and objectively taking stock of what could be done differently.

___ 7. Overgeneralization—Jumping to conclusions that are not really warranted by the information available.

___ 8. Over-attention to others’ impressions—Worrying too much about how you are viewed and judged by others.

___ 9. Overly simplistic “black and white” thinking—Maintaining that something is either one way or another and disregarding that there is always a “gray area” in between.

___ 10. Making life events into self-worth issues—Building some task into a test of how good and/or adequate you are as a person.

Note: All of the above forms of negative self-talk have antidotes, as they are simply bad habits of thought that can be unlearned and/or replaced with something more helpful to you.

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The Stress Doctor is IN!!!

“ALL THAT WE ARE IS THE RESULT OF WHAT WE HAVE THOUGHT.” - BUDDHA

“I WAS GOING TO BUY A COPY OF THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING, THEN I THOUGHT: WHAT THE HELL GOOD WOULD THAT DO?” - RONNIE SHAKES

“REFLECT ON YOUR PRESENT BLESSINGS, OF WHICH EVERY MAN HAS MANY, NOT ON YOUR PAST MISFORTUNES, OF WHICH ALL MEN HAVE SOME.” - CHARLES DICKENS



“I am not a lazy bum! I am a potential workaholic with highly developed stress management skills!”

ANNETTE VAILLANCOURT, PH.D.

LICENSED CLINICAL PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR

- 14 years experience gently helping individuals, couples and groups resolve personal problems, manage stress, and reach their full potential.
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10 IRRATIONAL BELIEFS—NOT TO BE BELIEVED

1. You **MUST** have sincere love and approval almost all the time from the people you find important.
2. You **MUST** prove yourself thoroughly competent, adequate and worthy to everyone.
3. You **HAVE TO** view life as **AWFUL, TERRIBLE, or A CATASTROPHE** when something doesn’t go the way you would like them to.
4. People who hurt your feelings or upset you are **BAD PEOPLE** and should be blamed and punished.
5. If something scares you, you **MUST** be terribly upset and think about nothing else.
6. Emotional upset comes from external sources and you have little control over your response.
7. It’s easier and desirable to **AVOID** life’s difficulties than to face them and learn self-discipline.
8. Because the past strongly affected one’s life, it should affect it forever.
9. You can achieve happiness through no effort.
10. You **SHOULD** always have certain and perfect control over things.