

Attitudes: Prisons or Wings

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—Our greatest enemy is our own thoughts.

Our thoughts, attitudes, and responses can imprison us or liberate us. We forget that we choose our thoughts. More often, it seems our thoughts have a life of their own. But every thought is a choice. We decide what our thoughts will be, which thoughts we keep, which thoughts we discard, and which thoughts we build our lives on. How do we choose thoughts and attitudes that propel us toward freedom?

Trapped in Obsessive Thinking

First, we need to understand how thoughts can make us captive. Have you ever got “stuck” thinking about something over and over? Do you ever get “trapped” in a worry you can’t shake off? Most thoughts tend to be obsessive. Our thoughts are repetitive because they have no outlet, so they just circle like buzzards. We believe we can “think” ourselves out of an endless mind loop, but that never works because thoughts can’t be used to combat thoughts. Only action or real change can break obsessive thinking because then the basis for those thoughts has been altered. Judgment, unforgiveness, self-hatred, worry, and regret are just a few attitudes that imprison us in that they “lock” us into a mindset with no escape.

During my twenties and thirties, I suffered from low self-esteem and self-hatred. I was convinced that no one liked me. Because I believed I was socially unattractive, I made no effort to engage people socially, but withdrawing into myself and sabotaging any attempt by others to befriend me. “Why try to make friends when they will reject me?” Because of my distancing behavior, people avoided me. This only reinforced my negative beliefs about myself. People didn’t like me because I gave them good reason not to. Thoughts drive behaviors that affect how others respond.

At the time, I didn’t have any of these insights. All I knew was that I didn’t like myself and that others didn’t like me. During this time, my negative self-

talk was active and incessant. I was trapped in circular thinking that interpreted everything as further evidence of my shortcomings. Finally, I sought help from some therapists. The biggest help was attending a weekly support group where I met others I could relate to. In that affirming environment, I discovered myself beneath the layers of my self-imposed false conceptions and found something real and something I could value. Taking action and implementing real change enabled me to defeat the obsessive negative thinking.

Taking Action

If we don't make a change, then our obsessive thinking continues unabated. Sometimes, we feel trapped because we can't see a way out. The way out, from our perspective, involves something not under our control, such as other people needing to change or money we don't have. We need to look for options that ARE under our control. We're quick to disregard options that scare us, like leaving a relationship or job, but sometimes the scariest option is the correct course of action. In every situation, we always have choices. Nothing changes unless we take action.

All About Me

I've found that most of my obsessive thinking centers on me. "Why are these terrible things happening to me? What if the dreaded outcome happens to me?" Even when something doesn't directly involve me, I insert my ego into the situation and make it about me. Fear is usually tied to ego, especially fear of loss or pain. Ego will do everything to avoid loss or pain, so any possible threat, whether real or imagined, will activate it and cause us to interpret our circumstances through the lens of self.

Ego is like the sun and our obsessive thoughts like planets in orbit around the sun, circling endlessly. When ego is cast down, then the obsessive thoughts drop off because they have nothing to orbit. Putting aside our ego is no easy

task, especially as it never stays down, but with God's help it's not impossible. The first step is to recognize its influence. When you find yourself obsessing about something, ask yourself, "How am I making this about me?" Then seek to remove yourself from the equation. Try to insert God into the center of things, instead of yourself.

Recently, I was dealing with insecurity. Looking deeper, I realized that my insecurity was due to fear, fear of loss. I had nothing real to validate my fears, except my imaginative reinterpretation of events. I had taken events and made them about me, and focused on how they threatened me and how they could lead to a worst-case scenario. First, I had to remove my ego from the situation by letting the events stand on their own without my interpretation or self-insertion. It helps to ask for God's view of things. He calmly sees things as they are, without judgment or amplification, and from an eternal perspective. When I step back and ask myself if something will matter much a thousand years from now, I can usually release my grip on it when I realize the situation will have no effect on my future life with God.

Facing Fear

My next step was to confront my fear of loss. The way I deal with fear is to face the worst-case scenario and tell myself that it will be manageable. I can survive any loss with God's help. In other words, I need not fear anything because God will give me the grace to bear any challenge. "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." (Psalm 23:4). If I can entrust God with the worst-case scenario, then I can relax about any less terrible outcomes. I knew all these scenarios were imagined and unlikely, but unless I confront my fears, even when unfounded, they will have continued power over me. The peace I seek comes from trusting God that, no matter what, I will be okay.

Choosing New Attitudes

To end obsessive thinking, the action we need to take is sometimes internal, such as changing our attitude. In these cases, the required action is that of letting go, letting go of ego and our need to control. Here is where choice comes in. Trust and fear cannot coexist for long. The greater of the two will often consume the other. If we continually choose to entrust our lives to God instead of our egos, then trust takes root, fear loses its power, and peace can reside in our souls. We choose to release our tight grip on events and we choose to trust God. Try to cultivate an attitude of gratitude, which guards us against negative thoughts.

If obsessive thinking can imprison us, what attitudes can set us free? Attitudes that are positive, non-limiting, and hopeful give us wings to move beyond our present state. Negative and self-limiting thoughts keep us stuck where we are, but when we choose thoughts and attitudes that are self-affirming and not fear-based but rooted in faith, then our thoughts can escape their orbits and soar outward to new possibilities. Choose attitudes that give you wings and free you to expand beyond yourself.

Using the example of my fear of loss, what would be a replacement attitude that gives me wings? A belief that I can thrive regardless of any loss. Paul says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13). Changing attitudes is difficult when we are addicted to our favorite mental recordings. We have to reprogram our brains with new repetitive messages that remind us we have value and potential (read Romans 12:1-2). In verse 3, Paul says, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment." Sober judgment means to view ourselves as we truly are, not putting ourselves down or inflating ourselves. When we put ego aside and let go of control and fear, we can see ourselves clearly and love our true selves and nurture our souls to grow beyond the narrow confines of ego.

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