

Your Relationship to Your Thoughts

The human mind is a ceaseless problem solver, judge, analyzer, and generally useful machine for understanding the world around us. Truly, our minds do much to enrich our lives and make them easier, more comfortable, safer, etc. However, sometimes they turn on us or just keep us stuck. When that happens, it is useful to get some space between ourselves and our minds.

For example, let's say that your mind tells you things like, "I'm not very smart." Or, "Why would anyone ever want to be with me?" Or let's say that perhaps not explicitly, but lurking below the surface a little, is a pressure your mind is putting on you that sounds something like, "I need to be perfect." And maybe these thoughts are pretty convincing and actually have an impact on how you live your life. For example, when you have that thought about not being very smart, are you less likely to challenge yourself in school, or apply for a demanding job, or raise your hand to share an idea at work? Perhaps you spend much time mentally beating up on yourself when your mind perceives a short coming in your actions. And if you really believe that idea that you have to be perfect, you might be more likely to get angry at somebody or retreat from a relationship where someone might see that you are not perfect. So, sometimes our minds actually hold us back.

Here are some ways to prevent that from happening:

- 1) Name the thought. When your mind tells you that you are not very smart, just frame it in this way: Here's the "I'm not very smart" thought.
- 2) Observe your mind without getting tangled up in it by silently or out loud just narrating: "Right now I am noticing (or having, or observing) the thought that I'm not very smart."
- 3) Treat your mind like a third person: "My mind is handing me the thought that I am not very smart."
- 4) If this thought were part of a story that is holding you back in your life, name the story involved: Now my mind is reading me the "I'm not very smart" story.
- 5) If you are feeling down, anxious, or angry or otherwise upset, see if you can notice what thought is showing up in your mind and just ask yourself how helpful that thought is. If it is not helpful, choose to do something different, something that might enrich your life or offer you some growth.
- 6) Finally, consider singing unhelpful thoughts that you notice to the tune of a playful song such as "Happy Birthday," or the Star Wars theme song.

With all of these, the point is not even so much to feel better, as it is to get out of the trap that your mind is laying for you. When you use these strategies you will often feel better, but the real prize here is to increase your flexibility and help you do things that matter to you in your life. So upon utilizing one of these strategies, pick an action you could take that would symbolize you are living the kind of life you want to live or being the kind of person that you most want to be, and go ahead and do that. Maybe that action is to raise your hand and ask a question in class or volunteer for an assignment at work. You are the one who gets to choose. Have fun!