



Are You a Victim of Your Own Thinking? The Innocuous Power and Influence of Thoughts

by Jason Birkevold Liem
Leadership & Communication Coach
@MINDtalkCoach

One major fact of the human condition is that our brains never shut up. There is a constant stream of chatter. It's been estimated that we have anywhere between 60000 to 80000 thoughts on any given day, and because of this many of us have become oblivious to the brain's incessant babbling. It can be akin to sitting in a room with the sound of a ventilation system. After awhile your senses simply assimilate the noise and eventually block it out.

An individual thought may seem like vapour in the atmosphere - you know it is there and so what. Thoughts, whether they take the form of a question, statement, image or memory, are not always as innocuous as we make think they are. It is true that many of our thoughts tend to be vacuous and mundane and focus on the banalities of our day. But we have other thoughts that become the triggers that start a cascade of electrical, chemical and biological processes within us.

Depending on the nature of the thought it will trigger different cascades, which in turn awaken different brain structures with their own unique functions. This has a direct and significant impact on the quality of how we communicate, collaborate, cooperate and make decisions.

In a previous post I spoke to the nature of the brain and its tendency to focus on the negative, which comes down to a survival mechanism where our brains are in a constant state of vigilance to potential threats. Well this goes to the root of the origins of our thoughts which also tend to be negative in nature.

It is the nature of these thoughts that are the prime reason for the epidemic of psychological stress, anxiety and depression in our modern world.

PATTERNS OF THOUGHT

By repeating an action or a series of action we become proficient and develop refined skills. It may be swinging a golf club, driving a car, playing a piano and so on. We habituate to a skill where conscious awareness of performing the act is no longer required. It is this same mechanism that is in play regardless if the habit we form is helpful or unhelpful.

When we think of habits we tend to think about physical habits. But we also form mental habits. Through experience with similar encounters we develop a pattern of thinking that becomes habituated. This pattern eventually solidifies and forms our beliefs about specific situations, places, and people.

For example, if you work with a project team for a year and you develop rapport after working with the same project team for a year you will develop working rapport with the members of the team. Through repeated interactions you form specific beliefs (i.e. assumptions) about each of them. Those beliefs crystallise into habits of thought which heavily influences how you approach, communicate and interact with them. These formed patterns of thought may be functional, but may also be dysfunctional.

This same mechanism is also true for countless of other things in our lives. The only relevant reality is our perception of reality. That is, what determines our mindset, emotions and behaviour is the meaning we give to an event, person or situation.

Since the brain is wired to notice and remember dangers and threats the meaning we give to things will tend to be weighed more toward the negative than the positive.

The negatively loaded meaning we assign to people, events and situations tends to work against us in three ways.

1. We tend to distort reality with our subjective views
2. We come to wrong conclusions
3. We focus on unfavourable outcomes

METACOGNITION

Here is the good news - we don't have to be victims to our evolutionary programming. We all have the ability of metacognition - the ability to think about our thinking. This is where we can kick back and watch our own thoughts pop in and out of existence. We become passive observers watching the antics of the brain neither reacting nor judging to the jumble of thoughts.

If our brain generates a thought we don't like we can let it go as we would a balloon tied to a string. It simply floats up and away and is carried by the wind far from us. This very fact means we can consciously choose the meaning we assign to a given person or event. We don't have to passively fall back to our default pattern of thinking. We can start afresh.

By reengineering our beliefs we literally change the nature and structure of our thoughts.

Here is the basic premise of cognitive behavioural psychology.

- 1 Beliefs determine the Nature of Thoughts. This means optimistic beliefs give rise to optimistic thoughts and pessimistic beliefs give rise to pessimist thoughts.
- 2 Thoughts trigger Emotions. This means optimistic thoughts ignite optimistic emotions and pessimistic thoughts ignite pessimistic emotions.
- 3 Emotions trigger Behaviour. This means optimistic emotions ignite approach behaviour and pessimistic emotions ignite avoidance behaviour.

IT'S YOUR CHOICE

In the end, we choose to let the nature of our default thinking drag us down into a subjective and reactive mindset where the focus is negative, problem-oriented and beyond our control. We can also choose to invest effort and energy to move toward being objective, solution-oriented and knowing the locus of control is within us.

Too many of us put the blame somewhere out there. Of course that is our prerogative. But in the end if we don't take responsibility for our thoughts we do it to our own detriment. We leave our selves feeling weak, exposed, vulnerable. We see our selves as victims of circumstance.

In the end, it is the meaning we assign that will determine how we think, how we emote and how we behave. We all have the ability of metacognition and assigning constructive meaning to what ever we confront. Anything else is only an excuse to avoid taking responsibility for our own mindset.

Curious about brain-based coaching and leadership development? Please contact me or visit www.MINDtalk.no

You can also find our online course to better understanding how to manage your brain at:

<https://www.udemy.com/managing-with-the-brain-in-mind>