



The Power of Rethinking

A simple tool to help you feel better.

Updated September 11, 2023 | Reviewed by Monica Vilhauer Ph.D.

- How we think about situations shapes our emotional responses.

- Rethinking refers to changing the initial thoughts we have about a situation.

- People who rethink frequently have more positive emotion and less negative emotion than those who don't.

- It's happened to all of us. Our friend is late to meet us at a restaurant. With each passing minute, we become more upset. We wonder: "Did they simply forget?" "Do they not care enough to send a simple text message about the delay?" "Is our friendship over?"

A Tale of Two Paths

What happens next matters more than you might think. This is because there are two possible paths we can take at this point. On one path, negative feelings follow these initial thoughts, and a rising tide of anger engulfs us. We start to feel hot and uncomfortable, ill at ease. Suddenly, we become less sure of ourselves and our place in the world. Later that day, we're preoccupied and short-tempered with everyone we interact with. What had seemed like a good day has turned noticeably darker, as though the

sun has gone behind a massive cloud.

But there's a second path. On that path, we pause and check our initial thoughts about what happened. We stop to wonder—is there any other reason

our friend might be so late?

Merely asking this question can slow the rush of negative feelings. This creates the space to step out of our own initial perspective and imagine another point of view. What if our friend was facing an unexpected crisis beyond her control? Or what if her phone had simply run out of battery, making her feel terrible about leaving us hanging? These thoughts lead to very different

feelings. Where anger had started to grow, now feelings of compassion and caring take their place. Instead of shrinking into ourselves, we feel the urge to reach out and help others. What had seemed like a good day still seems like a good day, as we reflect on how many things had to go right for us to even be where we are at this moment.

Looking for the Other Handle

The idea that our thoughts matter is nothing new. Nearly two thousand years ago, the Stoic philosopher Epictetus said: "People are disturbed not by the things that happen, but by the opinions about the things." In other words, it's not

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The Zurka Bird



Two wealthy brothers set out one Christmas to purchase the very best Christmas present they could find for their mother. The search for this present became so fierce that the two brothers turned it into a contest to see who could find the most unique and extraordinary present that was available. One brother thought he had found the perfect present. He found a Zurka bird.

Now the Zurka bird was no ordinary bird. It was a very rare and special bird. Costing many thousands of dollars, it had to be flown in from the Amazon. It could speak five different languages. It could recite beautiful poetry and sing opera. It was an amazing bird, indeed.

So the brother paid dearly for the Zurka bird, wrapped it carefully and had it sent to his mother for Christmas. On Christmas day, he gave his mother plenty of time to wake up, eat breakfast, and open his gift. Finally he could wait no longer. He called his mother and when she picked up the telephone, he almost shouted into the phone, "Mother, mother, what did you think about the beautiful Zurka bird that I sent you?"

On the other end of the line, the mother had this reply: "Oh, son, it was delicious!"

God has given to us some wonderfully unique gifts. Unfortunately, we sometimes don't realize how wonderful they are and we end up misusing them or doing great damage to them. Just as the woman ate the Zurka bird (which was delicious) and never

really enjoyed it as intended, there are many people who eat up many things in this life (which are also delicious) and never really enjoy it as God intended.

God has given us many other gifts as well—and he wants us to use them for their intended purpose (1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, Romans 12). And then there is Jesus Christ, God's greatest gift of all (2 Corinthians 9:15). Do you appreciate God's gifts to you?

Maybe we need to Re-think about how many gifts God has given us and how we are using them. Join us for the "Re-thinking your Life" series.

Pastor Greg



what happens to us that determines our emotions, but how we think about what happens to us. This is why Epictetus counseled: “Everything has two handles, the one by which it may be borne, the other of which may not.” In other words, whether we’re feeling let down by someone or discouraged by an important setback, Epictetus reminds us that there is always more than one way of thinking about it (which he refers to as a “handle”): one that allows us to bear this difficulty better, and another that prolongs our suffering.

The Science of Emotion Regulation

In the past few decades, scientists have taken this age-old wisdom to heart and begun to systematically study the effects of rethinking. Now the evidence is in, and we know that compared to people who don’t use their power of rethinking, people who do use their power of rethinking generally feel more positive emotion and less negative emotion. When negative emotions do come up, they feel less bothered by them and are better able to bounce back from a negative mood. They even seem to enjoy better physical health.

A Snapshot of Your Current Level of Rethinking

How often do you use rethinking? This short measure can help answer this question and tell you how your use of rethinking compares to other people’s.

1. When I want to feel more *positive* emotion (such as joy or amusement), I *change what I’m thinking about*.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7
Strongly Disagree > Strongly Agree

2. When I want to feel less *negative* emotion (such as sadness or anger), I *change what I’m thinking about*.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7
Strongly Disagree > Strongly Agree

3. When I’m faced with a stressful situation, I make myself *think about it* in a way that helps me stay calm.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7
Strongly Disagree > Strongly Agree

4. When I want to feel more *positive* emotion, I *change the way I’m thinking* about the situation.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7
Strongly Disagree > Strongly Agree

5. I control my emotions by *changing the way I think* about the situation I’m in.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7
Strongly Disagree > Strongly Agree

6. When I want to feel less *negative* emotion, I *change the way I’m thinking* about the situation.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7
Strongly Disagree > Strongly Agree

Once you’ve answered these 6 questions, add up your answers. This is your current rethinking score. If you scored 32 or more, your score is in the top third of rethinking scores. If you scored between 26 and 31, your score is in the middle third of rethinking scores. If you scored 25 or less, your score is in the bottom third of rethinking scores.

Practicing Rethinking

Rethinking is powerful, and it brings about lots of good outcomes. It is also something we can all get better at! We can do this by pausing when our emotions start to arise, noticing our thoughts, and asking whether there are any other ways of thinking about a situation. Studies have shown that people can strengthen their rethinking skills through practice and that, when they do, they enjoy the benefits observed in people who spontaneously rethink on their own. The benefits are so dramatic that rethinking is now a key part of many scientifically supported treatments for people who are suffering from anxiety and depression.

So, remember that you can get better at rethinking by practicing this skill. And know that as you get better, you’re likely to experience more positive emotion, less negative emotion, and greater resilience when you hit a speed bump—large or small. This is the power of rethinking.

Psychology Today



TODAY'S THOUGHTS BECOME TOMORROW'S HABITS

CLINTON MANLEY, EDITOR, DESIRING GOD

Do you think about your thoughts?

Not in some meta or psychological way, but do you ever consider the kinds of things you allow your mind to dwell on? According to Scripture, thinking about your thinking is not only a fruitful discipline but a necessary one. The Bible repeatedly draws our attention to our habits of attention.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the *renewal of your mind*, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:2

Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything. 2 Timothy 2:7
[Jesus] turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” Matthew 16:23

We could go on. And time would fail us to list all the times Scripture calls us to “remember” (the word occurs in the ESV well over two hundred times), or to “consider” (one mantra of the book of Hebrews), or to “understand” (a favorite imperative of Proverbs).

God considers the patterns of our thought crucial to the pursuit of happiness and holiness. So, I ask again, how often do you think about the kinds of things you think about?

In Matthew 6 Jesus warns us not to fall into the mental rut of anxiety, fretful about our daily needs. However, he does not expect us to banish worry by mere willpower. He beckons our attention to the birds. He calls us to linger over the lilies. He invites us into a new pattern of thinking centered on God’s fatherly and kingly care.

The inverse of anxiety in Matthew 6 is seeking the kingdom (6:33). In other words, we are to submit ourselves to the care and governance of our Father’s rule. What brings us comfort is the surety of his ruling care; he is the gardener of his good creation and of us.

In other words, Jesus says, “Don’t think in that way by thinking this way.” Make anxiety increasingly unthinkable by increasingly thinking about the kingdom. Jesus cares about the long-term mental

and emotional fruit of what we give our attention to. “Tomorrow, you will have more thoughts like the ones you chose and approved of today.”

Just like we curate a social media feed, clicking “Not Interested” or “More Like This” or “Subscribe,” we must curate our thoughts so that the feed of our mind becomes more and more conformed to the mind of Christ. Philippians 2:5. Over time, we can make godly patterns of thinking easier and ungodly ones more difficult. And to do that, we learn to interrogate our thoughts.

Whatever is good, true, and beautiful, fill your mind-feed with these things by curating your thoughts. So we might paraphrase Paul’s happy exhortation in Philippians 4:8. Implicit in this invitation into fruitful thinking is the call to consider whether the things that occupy our thoughts are worthy of being there. Paul gives us criteria to assess our thinking. And this is not the only place the Bible gives us standards for our mental patterns. There’s no better time than the start of a new year to begin, by the Spirit, to renew your mind. As you strive to curate your mind-feed, here are a handful of questions to ask.

1. Does this thought align with truth?

Paul starts his lovely litany of things we should pay attention to with “whatever is true” Philippians 4:8. We are not left, like Pilate, scratching our heads about what that means. Jesus says, “I am . . . the truth” John 14:6, implying that whatever is true accords with who God is as he has revealed himself in Jesus and in Scripture and, to a lesser extent, in the story he’s telling in this world.

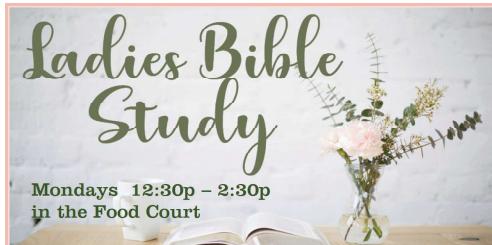
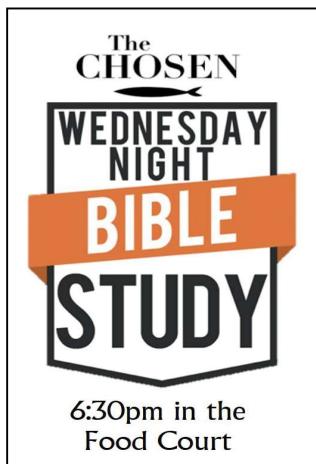
Perhaps the most prevalent falsehood we coddle is the one that sees me at the center of all things. That lie is as old as the garden. No one should “think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment” Romans 12:3. Any rhythm of thought that fuels our natural pride and self-centeredness should receive an immediate “Dislike.” True patterns of thinking are not the pool of Narcissus, riveting our attention on our own reflection. Instead, they lead out of the prison of self. So, does this thought help me think rightly about myself? Do my habits of mind tend to focus on me? Or do they help me to “count others more significant” Philippians 2:3? Does this thought fit God’s character, his word, his world, and his way? Does it go with the grain of reality? Is it true?

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2. Does this thought dwell on good?

Sometimes the best way to establish good patterns is to root out bad ones. Thus, Paul orients all our thinking when he says, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" — namely, "sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness" Colossians 3:2, 5. We want our thoughts to go habitually toward the One who is good, leading us away from the fleeting pleasures of sin that the world peddles in. For many of us, good thinking gets stymied, not by dwelling on explicit evil, but by shallow distraction. Eating a Twinkie every once in a while won't kill you, but don't make a diet out of them. "Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature" 1 Corinthians 14:20. Trivial, banal, frivolous thinking makes a rootless man. Instead, let the gravitas of good hold your attention. Think about weighty matters to become mentally strong. Ask yourself, is *this thought* worthwhile? Does it have any bearing on the things that really matter? Does my time online distract me with tinsel-toy and cotton-candy thoughts? Does *this thought* incline me toward sin and the patterns of the unbelieving world? Does considering this person in this way lead to impurity? Does reading this news site inflame ungodly passions in me? Do I dwell on what is *good*?



3. Does this thought help me see beauty?

There are many beauties in the world worth attending to. Sunrise over fresh snow. A child's smile. Congregational singing. The poetry of Coleridge. The color green. Beauty calls to us. It awakens our delight and desire. It refuses to leave us unchanged. Beauty — anywhere it can be found — is worth our wonder.

But all these lesser beauties point beyond themselves. They are splashes of another majesty, echoes of a triune harmony. Beauty calls us to behold Beauty himself. When we learn to attend to beautiful things — along with those that are good and true — our minds can trace those beams back to the sun.

Ultimately, all our thoughts should be directed up toward our chief end: to glorify God by enjoying him forever. So, the first and final criteria for curating our thoughts is, *Does this thought help me enjoy God more in the ways he intends?* Does this line of thinking incline me toward him or cause me to forget him? Does it open my eyes to his goodness, truth, and beauty, or does it dull my spiritual senses? Does it help me pursue full and lasting joy in Jesus?

God gave us minds to feed our hearts with kindling that inflames our affections for him. Our minds exist for Christ. So, curate your thoughts to create ruts that run with that divine delight.



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