

Westside Notes



A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step

Featured Article: *How I Use A.C.T. to Deal with “Stinking Thinking”*

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Sometimes my clients ask me how they can get their minds to quiet down. I am a big fan of mindfulness and meditation. I recommend starting with 5 minutes of silent meditation in the morning. Some people think that if they meditate “properly,” they will have a “blank mind.” As a longtime meditator, I am here to report that I have never experienced a “blank mind” and I still have “stinking thinking” on a regular basis.

I have experimented with all kinds of ways to deal with stinking thinking, here are some of them: reading the book *The Secret* (I felt like a failure when all my positive thinking failed to bring a Porsche into my life—this led to even more stinking thinking), trying not to think about what is bothering me (only made me think about it more—try not thinking about a pink bird and you will be surrounded by pink birds), chanting (works great and very uplifting but the thinking came right back), yoga (this is one of my favorite pastimes and I experience lots of benefits from my yoga practice, (sometimes I have stinking thinking in the middle of yoga class, especially when the entire class is doing a pose that I cannot manage with my tight runner’s hamstrings), meditation (works well and calms me down like nothing else, but thinking still occurs!). I could continue my list, but I think you get the point.

I recently attended a training on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy otherwise known as A.C.T. The therapy combines mindfulness and behavioral interventions. It differs from other therapies in that it does not attempt to reduce symptoms like stinking thinking; however, symptom reduction is often a byproduct of the therapy. The goal of ACT is to create a rich and meaningful life while experiencing the pain and discomfort which is an inevitable part of life. There are two main assumptions underlying ACT’s interventions. The first is to learn how to develop acceptance of unpleasant experiences which are out of our personal control. The second is making a commitment and taking actions which support having a rich and meaningful life. So if I treat my stinking thinking using ACT, my first step is to give up trying to stop my stinking thinking (allowing it as opposed to trying to eliminate it). The next step is to learn how to accept it or be with it when it happens.

There are six core principles of ACT: The first is Contacting the Present Moment, which simply means being present in the moment. The second is Defusion, which I will be talking about in greater detail. The third core principle is Acceptance, which means allowing ourselves to be open

to all our feelings, sensations and thoughts as they come up without struggling with them. The fourth core principle is Self-as-Context which is similar to the Observer Self, from the meditation world. The fifth core principle is Values, which in ACT terms means deciding what we want to stand for in life. The sixth core principle is Committed Action, which simply means taking actions that are based on our values.

I am going to focus on the principle of defusion. Defusion is the practice of learning how to avoid becoming “fused” with our thoughts. In ACT, fusion is defined as when our thoughts and whatever we are thinking about become fused together in our minds. I like to think about it as becoming overly attached to my thoughts, which leads to “stinking thinking.” ACT refers to our thoughts as “stories” so another way to explain defusion is the story and the event become “fused” or stuck together. We start believing that what our thoughts are telling us is the absolute truth.

One way to understand this is that certain magazines and newspapers are known to be somewhat biased, especially some of the tabloids. So my thinking is often similar to a story from *The National Enquirer* and somehow I believe that the tabloid reporter (Me!) is telling the truth. I have a choice in how I respond to the stories that are in the tabloids. ACT differs from CBT in that it does not recommend substituting a positive thought for a negative one or practicing “thought-stopping”—two very effective techniques that do work for some people; instead ACT recommends learning how to experience our feelings and change our response to our thinking.

One important principle of defusion is to refrain from asking ourselves whether a thought is true and instead to focus on whether a thought is helpful. If we pay attention to a particular thought, is it going to help us to create the kind of life that we desire? If I notice myself drifting off into worry, I can stop and gently say “Is this thought helpful?” There are many ways to practice defusion, here are two of my favorites—

I AM HAVING THE THOUGHT THAT

1. Pick a troubling thought that you have on a regular basis—a good example might be “I am not good enough.” Be sure to pick one that really works for you. Often when I am out running and I see other younger runners flying by me I think “I am too slow.”
2. Now insert the following words in front of your thought “I am having the thought that . . . I am too slow.” Practice the new thought a few times in your mind. “I am having the thought that I am too slow.”

Often after practicing this technique people notice some distance between themselves and the thought. You might try practicing this technique each time the thought comes up and see what happens. You can practice this anytime you catch yourself thinking unhelpful thoughts.

NAMING OUR THOUGHTS AS STORIES

To continue with the “I am too slow” thought, another popular version is the “I am too old story.” In this story I am too old and certainly too slow to be running and I should feel embarrassed to be seen running outside in a neighborhood where so many younger, faster runners are passing me by. Often there are different versions of the same story, I think you get the idea.

1. Name your thought as a story—“The I am too old story.”
2. When the thought comes into your mind (usually for me this happens early in my run before the endorphins have kicked in) simply acknowledge it—“Oh there it is, the I am too old story” or “I know this one it is the I am too old story” or maybe you like “My favorite story—the I am too old story.” Use whatever words feel authentic to you.

3. Once you have acknowledged the story, there is no action to take, just let the story come and go and continue on with what you were doing. In my case, just keep running.

So the next time your mind starts engaging in “stinking thinking” try one of these techniques and see if you find it helpful. I recommend Dr. Russ Harris’ website if you would like to learn more about Acceptance and Commitment therapy: <http://www.actmindfully.com.au/>.