



Troubling Thoughts

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

A teenager feels depressed because she's sure the kids at school don't like her. A college student is afraid that he won't do well on an important exam next Wednesday. A mom stays up late worrying that her sixteen year old daughter, who just started driving the family car, might be late because she has gotten into an accident. A middle-age man has disturbing, reappearing images of someone he thinks has died.

We all have troubling thoughts. We all have ideas and notions that bother us at least some of the time.

For most of us however, the troubling thoughts do not rule our lives. In fact, most of the time our thinking is just routine. We think "the dishes need washing," so we turn on the faucet and we wash them. We think "I need gas in the car in order to get to work tomorrow," so we plan to get up five minutes early and take care of it.

Typically, the thoughts we experience are neutral and sometimes the thoughts are happy. Of course, we don't complain about these. It's when our thoughts begin to bother us in some way that we become concerned. When our thoughts make us feel uncomfortable, we try to find a solution.

Our minds excel at this, at least most of the time. That's because the brain is a problem-solving machine. It can easily discern problems in ourselves or in the world around us. This is helpful because we encounter so many problems that need to be solved. When confronted with a problem, the mind starts working to find a solution. Sometimes this occurs quickly and we hardly think about it. Sometimes it takes a while, as we may need to mull things over.

On the other hand, the mind may be better at seeing problems than at developing solutions. The mind can easily find problems that we don't need to address, or imagine negative outcomes that are very unlikely, but still concern us. These types of thoughts can be troubling to us until the mind finds a solution.

Four Factors

When experiencing a troubling thought, there are four factors that can help us determine how severe it is.

The first factor to consider is whether the thought is intentional. There are many problems in our lives that we choose to work on. We solve these in our own time without any annoyance. But some thoughts intrude into our world uninvited. This can be something as simple as a song playing in our minds that we can't seem to stop it or it can be a worrisome thought that something bad is about to happen.

The second factor is intensity. A thought can be mildly annoying or severely disturbing. It can be minor such as the fear about how we'll perform on an upcoming test or it can be serious such as the scary image of a ghost that pops into our head.

The third factor is frequency. Some disturbing thoughts play over and over and some come to us only one time.

The fourth factor is content. The subject of a thought might be extremely frightening or it might be relatively simple. "I don't think so-and-so likes me" is mild compared to a thought such as "God hates me...I'm a bad person...I should die."

All four of these factors determine the total impact of a troubling thought. If it's extreme on all of these scales, the thought might cause us to lose touch with reality.

How to Manage Troubling Thoughts

If we're experiencing troubling thoughts that are mild to moderate, we can usually find ways to cope on our own. But if we're on the extreme end of the spectrum, we may have a diagnosable mental health condition. This is when we almost always need outside help.

At the lower end of the spectrum, a troubling thought may be part of the brain's normal problem solving. The college student who frets about his performance on the upcoming test can simply decide to spend time studying for it.

Other types of troubling thoughts can be replaced by positive images. Sometimes we can counter a depressing thought with a happy thought. When the depressing thought starts to enter our awareness, we can take a moment to recall scenes from the happy beach vacation we had last summer or remember a particularly joyful event from our childhood.

Sometimes a troubling thought is telling us that there's an underlying emotional issue we need to deal with. For example, consider the process of going through grief. The thoughts will be difficult. We may hear our thoughts saying something like, "I lost my mother. I miss her. I need her. I feel bad that she's gone." When grieving, it can help to talk about our feelings with a close friend, a family member, a minister, or a professional counselor.

For the really severe thoughts, we will almost always need a professional counselor and possibly a prescription for a mental health medication. When hearing voices that won't stop, especially if they're telling us to do something harmful, or when repeatedly seeing frightening images, we almost certainly need some kind of professional help.

There is one method that can be effective with all kinds of troubling thoughts. That is to remember that they are "just thoughts." Even the most severe and frightening thoughts are just thoughts. It helps to realize that our thoughts are generated by the mind and the mind can play tricks on us. Our thoughts, in themselves, are not necessarily true.

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