



Health & Wellbeing

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Flip Your Thinking

This month we are going to explore how our thinking can form patterns of thinking that can be unhelpful and unhealthy. The basic building blocks of your brain – brain cells are called neurons. We all have 100 billion or so of them, and they can each connect with 250,000 surrounding neurons because they are senders/receivers of information in your brain. And, if neurons are the transmitters, neural pathways are what give the information they send in our brains meaning.

Neural pathways are the connections between neurons that light up when you think of something for the first time, and the connections form a pattern in your brain. ... And the next time you think of that same thing, the same pattern lights up again - the same neural pathway. So neural pathways are how our brains store our thoughts. When your brain processes a new thought, it starts off as a lesser pathway. Like a baby trying to walk for the first time (neurons connecting from the brain to muscles, for balance etc.) and battling a bit. But the more you do it over and over again in the same way, the stronger and more dominant the neural pathway becomes. And now, today, as an adult, you don't need to think about walking anymore, it's a well-formed dominant neural pathway in your brain.

I like to think of it like walking through a field of corn. The first time you walk through corn that has not been walked through before you create the beginning of a pathway. The next time you walk that way, you might be able to see signs of where you walked before. But, the more times you walk through the field on the same path, the path will become well-trodden and an easier path to walk through. If someone else came across the field they would more than likely head down the well-trodden and established path as that is the easiest route. When we understand more how these pathways are formed we can begin to understand how this can affect our thinking and behaviours. If a young child grows up afraid of a dominant male figure (for example), they might have a fear response to all males even as an adult. If you grow up believing that you are bad with numbers, guess what – you'll suck at maths because the neural pathway your brain associates with maths is a negative one.



You can see how this can become a problem, right? Neural pathways are extremely powerful in determining our thought processes and in turn our behaviour. If I'm afraid to try new things or new ideas, it's probably because there's a neural pathway in my brain that triggers a fear response when I receive new information.

Fortunately, though, we're not stuck with our existing neural pathways. We can change them. It takes time and takes effort but we can train ourselves in different thought processes and change or create new neural pathways (new paths through the field of corn) in order to develop thinking patterns that are more healthy and helpful.



Do you know how many thoughts your mind thinks each hour of the day? Experts estimate that the mind thinks between 60,000–80,000 thoughts a day. That's an average of 2,500–3,300 thoughts per hour. This TEAR model demonstrates how our thinking impacts our behaviour. Our **THINKING** effects our **EMOTIONS** that then influences our **ACTIONS** which produces a **RESULT**

The way we **think** about things impacts **the way we do things**. The more we think about things in a negative way this forms a strong neural pathway and our corresponding behaviour become habitual.

Ready, Set, Go!

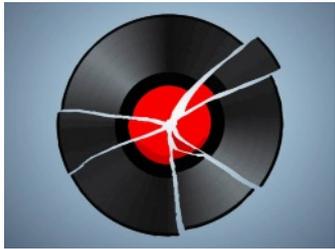
Changing neural pathways, or making new ones, is the key. It's what we call neuroplasticity, first described by Polish neuroscientist Jerzy Konorski in 1948, and studied by a whole host of neuroscientists like Michael Merzenich, David Hubel and Torsten Wiesel. And all it is is to say your brain can form new neural connections and basically change how you think about things.

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4 unhelpful thinking patterns and how to alter them.

Unhelpful and Unhealthy Thinking Patterns



1. The Broken Record

This is when we replay the same negative thinking over and over again. If you think about what happens when a record or a CD has a scratch on it, every time you get to the same point it will jump or screech etc... This happens with our thinking too. We replay the same thoughts repeatedly. This only strengthens the neural pathways that have been formed.



2. Martha the Martyr

This is when it becomes habit that you think your life is unfair and that people are better than you. This often happens when your energy and empathy tank is running dry. You focus on all the things you are doing for others and how no-one is caring about you. You begin to focus on how other people's lives appear to be so much easier than yours and how unfair that seems.



3. Your Inner Critic

I think every single one of us understands what we mean by the inner critic. That voice inside your head that highlights your weaknesses and undermines your confidence. That overplays what you can't do and underplays what you can. That reminds you of all your failings, your inadequacies and your weaknesses, that has you believing that you can't and you won't.



4. What you focus on magnifies

This is when we can 'make mountains out of molehills.' In other words we can focus on all that is going wrong or all that is negative and that appears bigger. It will fill our mind and leave no room to focus on or think about things that are positive or good. The RAS (Reticular Activating System) is a clever way of saying 'our eye finds what our brain is looking for' - so if we think about the bad we will find the bad.

Helpful and Healthy Thinking Patterns



If you think negative things about yourself all day long, your words begin to shape the atmosphere of your heart and the reality of your mind. The perspective of the way you see and interact with the world is influenced by the words you think. When you use "I have to" statements or "I ought to" or "I should" your personal choice is replaced with a victim mentality.

Make the change to "I get to" or "I am going to have a go at" or "I'm going to try to" and the feeling of powerlessness is quickly replaced with empowerment. You are making a choice. It doesn't always feel like it, but you possess innate power to make healthy choices for your life.



Moving your focus from the negative to looking for some positivity helps to magnify the positives. It doesn't get rid of what is not good, but it does allow you to see that there are positives. Another tip for this is the question 'what are you grateful **four**?' Each day try and form the habit of thinking of four things that you can be grateful for. Some days it may take some thinking! This is a great habit to get into with your children too. Making a grateful jar and keeping it somewhere where everyone can have access to it is a great idea to help develop this idea of noticing and drawing attention to the good. Write down what you are grateful for and pop it in the jar. Every so often pull them out to remind yourself.

Notice how your children think - do they have an inner critic, or do they replay the same thought patterns over and over? Do they make the negative bigger and find it difficult to see the achievements, the success, the good? How can you use these tools of flipping your thinking and what you focus on magnifies to help them form new neural pathways?

"Your mind is your instrument. Learn to be it's master and not it's slave."

Remez Sasson