



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Power of Your Thoughts

“Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing: your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation.” ~Viktor Frankl

Research from UCLA suggests that the average person experiences 70,000 thoughts a day, or a little more than 48 thoughts per minute. Can you imagine if that research had been conducted exclusively on judges or lawyers? Our brains are constantly processing external information from the world around us and internal information from within our own bodies. Our thoughts have a direct impact on our emotions and our physical health, so it is important to be mindful or aware of what types of thoughts you generally have in a day or a week. We generally think about the same types of issues, or in the same type of pattern, on a daily basis. For example, are your thoughts usually focused on the past, present, or future? Are they thoughts that are exciting, creative and positive, or pessimistic and self-deprecating? Do you spend a lot of time being judgmental and critical of other people or yourself? Are your thoughts generally calming or are they anxiety producing?

The study of psychoneuroimmunology researches the impact our psychological processes have on our nervous system and our immune system. The bottom line: negative thoughts lead to negative emotions that make us physically sick. Our thoughts trigger emotional reactions and specific types of chemicals in the body that can either boost or tax our immune system. For example, if you think about how you were upset with someone yesterday, you will release adrenaline and get upset now even though the situation is not currently happening. Adrenaline in large doses over long periods of time creates a very acid environment in the body that becomes a breeding ground for many types of illnesses and diseases.

Alternatively, sometimes the feelings in our body create our thoughts. For example, if your muscles are tense, your jaw is clenched, and you feel like you have butterflies in your stomach, your brain will create thoughts to make sense of those feeling and sensations, such as “I am nervous for this presentation.” But, you can always choose a different thought to make sense of your feelings, such as “I am excited for this presentation!” It is not our emotions or feelings that create suffering, it is our thoughts or how we interpret the feelings and emotions that get us into trouble.

Many of us blame others or the circumstances of our lives for how we feel. You’ve heard someone say, “He’s making me feel this way” or “This situation is stressing me out.” Ironically, neither other people nor what is happening around you can dictate how you feel. Your thoughts or interpretations of the environment create a chemical response in the brain that floods your body, thus creating your emotions and feelings. Nothing else, and no one else, can control the way you feel.

Spend some time examining the types of thoughts you have. When you catch yourself engaging in a thought or (a tirade of thoughts) that result in negative and uncomfortable emotional experiences, or that create suffering for yourself, take a mental break and ask yourself questions such as:

- How can I reframe this thought?
- How long have I been thinking like this about this subject? How can I change that perspective?
- Would I feel better if I thought about this subject in a different way?
- What would happen if I took a different perspective on this issue or this person?
- Why am I thinking a thought that is causing me to suffer? Is there a part of me that enjoys suffering or believes that I should be suffering?

There are many styles of mindfulness practices and ways to change our thoughts. It's not always easy to change patterns of thinking and the repetitive types of emotions that we are used to experiencing on a daily basis, but with awareness it is possible. Take a step back from the storyline or the thoughts you are thinking. The quote "Don't believe everything you think" is very applicable. Start to examine your thoughts with curiosity. Remember that they are just thoughts, and you can change them or let them go anytime.

Try to introduce thoughts that are more appreciative and full of gratitude instead of complaining or seeking out what is wrong with you or the people around you. When you catch yourself having thoughts that make you feel bad, try to reframe the thought to improve your mood. Reality is all about your perspective. If you believe, through your thoughts, that life is difficult and depressing, then it will be for you. If, however, you believe that life is full of fun challenges, then that is what you will experience. Throughout the day, periodically choose to focus your thoughts on the things that make you calm, peaceful, joyful, compassionate and caring. Not only will you enjoy your mood, but your body will thank you because those emotional states positively impact your immune system.

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