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Transforming Thoughts

“A mind once expanded by a new idea will never return to it’s original dimension” I love this quote though I’m not quite sure who wrote it. It has been attributed to everyone from William James to Oliver Wendall Holmes. I love the idea that, while poring through countless texts and soaking up new ideas through workshops and lectures, I can somehow expand my mind into a new dimension. This is what we’re aiming for, when we enter the self-help world. We yearn for a new idea, a new way of looking at things, in order to change. For me, at least, there is a thrill of excitement as I learn to look at things in a new way. Eagerly highlighting that perfect line within the book that made me go “aha”, yes that’s it. Unfortunately, I noticed a most unsettling phenomena of going through old books and again thinking what an amazing insight, only to realize I’d highlighted that same line years before. Even my notes in the margins struck me with their answers yet I couldn’t even recall writing them. What was happening? Have you ever done the same? Had it all figured out only to slip back into the same way of being years later? What is happening?

If it really feels like something is happening when we have an “aha” moment, that’s because it is. Our brain is made up of countless cells, called neurons, these neurons talk to each through electric charges due to the release of neurochemicals. When we have those moments of realization, we’re making a new connection that we can feel. But, in order for that connection to have any impact on our lives, it has to become stronger than the other connections. So, if I have the aha realization that meditation is the mode to peace but then I continue to believe that I don’t have time to meditate then I slip back into more ‘important’ things than peace and don’t meditate. Soon, I’m complaining of how stressed out I am and have forgotten that peace is available to me.

A new idea won’t become a new belief without practice. Every habit takes practice. The more particular neurons fire in a particular way, the more adept they become at that. How can we expand an awareness into a way of being. Baby steps.

One method I’ve found helpful is to imagine what you desire- Peace and happiness and then imagine the opposite of that- a nervous breakdown. Create a visual scale by taking out a sheet of paper and, on one end put nervous breakdown and the other peace and happiness. Draw a line between the two. Number them 1 and 10. Then, observe your thoughts. A particularly fruitful realm for me is through driving. Say I have the thought that the idiot in front of me will make me late for a meeting. I’ve slipped out of my newfound realizations about peace and back into my habitual pattern of thinking that I’m a victim and things won’t turn out well. The scale is helpful because it gives you a visual representation of your thoughts. So, my thought about someone being an idiot and will

make me late would be a lot closer to a nervous breakdown than peace and happiness. Maybe I would give it a 3.

What can I do? We can't actually replace a negative thought with a positive one. I cheered too many games saying "we can do it" when there was no way in hell the tired kids on that field were going to do much of anything.

If you replace your negative thought with a positive one that you don't believe, you won't have any feelings behind it. And, thoughts without feelings don't produce much of a neurochemical reaction. The negative thoughts are more powerful because you believe them. Your positive thoughts don't have to be as dramatic as your negative thoughts to replace them, they just have to be believed as strongly. So, you don't have to go from no one likes me to everyone likes me to feel better. You just have to something slightly more positive that you believe as much, such as well my neighbor likes me. It's really hard for us to simultaneously hold two equally powerful beliefs. So, if you believe that your neighbor likes you, you can't simultaneously strongly believe that no one does. You've just given yourself evidence that the belief that no one likes you isn't true. So, your emotions are there to guide you. So use them to help you here.

Now, if we really believe the statement- I screwed up...., it's probably not reasonable to think that we could find an equally believable statement up in the 10 range. What we want to do is just try to find something that we believe just as strongly that would be a 4 or so. So, for that we might think that once, back in 1982, we planned a good party. So, we might be able to believe- in the past I have done well with opportunity. That feels a little bit better, right? If we're habitually thinking 3 level beliefs, we won't move up the scale. By seeing where our mental energy really is, we can see where we need to move it. Little by little, as you're able to believe more positive thoughts, your desired reality becomes more possible. If you believe you'll screw up opportunities, you don't have a chance at feeling tranquil. Does that make sense?

So maybe, each time you notice yourself thinking the #3 statement, you can remind yourself of the truth of #4.

In this way, we're guiding our thoughts. We're actively making new connections. As you notice the thoughts passing through your head throughout the day, ask yourself- do I want this thought to be creating my life? Do I want to give energy towards a nervous breakdown or tranquility? You can see if that thought is leading you closer to your desired or undesired outcome and you can gently guide your thoughts toward something more pleasant.

This isn't just feel-good mumbo jumbo. What you are actually doing is forming new connections in your brain.

Our brain is made up of cells called neurons. Around the body of the neuron are what's called dendrites. Dendrites are little branches that reach out to receive the neurochemicals from other neurons. They easily grow and disappear, based on whether or not they are used. One of the more recent discoveries about antidepressant

medications is that they increase the level of a factor, which is like a fertilizer to help these things grow and branch out. Why is that so important? Because without new connections, the same stimuli will cause the same reaction. If the brain's resources are being used to maintain certain neuronal pathways, new branches can't grow to form new ones.

The stronger these connections, the easier information will flow to them. So, reactions will be more likely to flow towards whichever pathways are most active, or stronger. In neurology, this concept is summed up in the phrase, Neurons that fire together, wire together. Neurons that are routinely fired in a specific pattern will strengthen their bond, "wiring together" in a complex network that will be automatically set off whenever a trigger is presented in one's everyday life. Thinking of this helps to recognize why it is so important to spend as much time as possible in the new way of thinking, otherwise you go back to the connections that you are more used to.
