

The Power of Thought

BY GINNY WRIGHT LAPPORTE, PH.D.

“The trouble with most people is that they think with their hopes or fears or wishes rather than with their minds.”

-WILL DURANT

Fresh out of college and eager to work on the “frontlines” with those in need, I took a job at an adolescent runaway shelter outside of Washington, DC. Ronald Reagan was still in office and Nancy Reagan was in the throes of her “Just Say No” campaign to fight the drug problem plaguing our nation’s teens. At the time, I was filled with the youthful idealism typical of so many of my age-mates, and yet also dedicated to my goal of going to graduate school and fostering my intellectual/scientific self. I’m not sure which part of me objected more to the simplicity of the first lady’s “Just Say No” message. My idealist/social-minded self assumed that she was being entirely dismissive of the complex societal factors which led to the problems of drugs, alcohol, poverty and crime. The other (“I’m-going-to-be-a-psychologist-when-I-grow-up”) side was equally convinced of her oversimplicity, only this intellectual self focused more on the fact that psychological factors or internal conflict must be at the root of the problem.

How could encouraging children to “just say no” prove useful in any way?

To be honest, my skepticism followed me for some time. I think it was hard for me to accept that such a simple modification - replacing a thought or repeating a statement - could have any kind of meaningful impact. Truth be told, there’s no real evidence to suggest that the “Just Say No” campaign was successful at a societal level.

Nonetheless, I have, over time, become increasingly convinced of the power of our thoughts to change much about our lives.

“All that we are is the result of what we have thought.”

-BUDDHA, 563 BC - 483 BC

Our contemporaries are certainly not the first to postulate that there is much power to be found in our thoughts. Philosophers, religious figures, poets, and scientists alike have written about our ability to change ourselves by changing our thoughts. Although familiar phrases like the “power of positive thinking” or “think and grow rich” are most often found in the self-help/alternative medicine arena, these catchphrases have received support in controlled research regarding the success of cognitive therapy. Cognitive therapy involves recognizing unhelpful patterns of thinking and reacting, then modifying or replacing these with more realistic or helpful ones. Mental health research has fairly consistently found positive results of using cognitive therapy to treat depression, anxiety, shyness, social phobias, eating disorders, relationship problems and many other problems.

Despite the overwhelming research which supports the power of changing ones thoughts, many (if not most) people remain highly skeptical and are quick to request alternative forms of intervention for their emotional distress. Because negative thoughts or unhelpful thinking patterns become highly automatic, many people remain unaware of what they are thinking, let alone the impact of those thoughts on their functioning.

When an event unfolds, our conscious awareness typically tracks the event as

follows: 1)The event occurs, which leads to 2)An emotional response being experienced, which then leads to 3)A behavioral response being enacted. What often goes unnoticed is that the event does not lead to an emotional response directly, but rather does so indirectly by way of a cognitive appraisal of the situation.

The following is an example of this process:

EVENT: Telemarketer calls during dinner

THOUGHT: This jerk is interrupting dinner and I can’t trust his sales attempts anyway.”

EMOTION: Frustration, annoyance, anger

REACTION: Hang up. Respond firmly/ rudely.

If ones cognitive appraisal (i.e. thought) about the situation were different, the entire event would unfold differently:

EVENT: Telemarketer calls during dinner

THOUGHT: “Hmmm there may be a good deal to be had here.”

EMOTION: Interest, intrigue, appreciation

REACTION: Continue to speak. Respond in a more friendly/appreciative way.

When one evaluates situations within this framework, it becomes clear that events themselves are only partially responsible for how we feel and behave. Our appraisal of the situation is probably the most important influence on feelings and actions. Another way to look at it is that if you have concerns about the way you are either feeling or behaving, examining the underlying thought process may be the most effective way to make the changes you desire.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18

contribute to the individual's stress by painting such a bleak picture of the future. For each individual, the origin of such a thought could be different. However, many of us have grown up with the image of being part of a happy family and have never even imagined life without children. If we haven't even imagined the situation, we certainly cannot expect it to be happy.

The third and fourth questions speak to the irrationality of many negative loops. Is it logical to think that one will never be happy without having a child? Although disappointment and profound sadness are unavoidable emotions of infertility, it would be a choice to remain forever unhappy without a child. It is illogical to believe that being childless necessarily leads to unhappiness. Putting it all together, the answer to the fourth question, "Is this thought true?" is a definite no.

To restructure one's negative thinking takes work, and negative thoughts cannot be replaced with untruthful, pie-in-the-sky happy thoughts. No one should expect the someone suffering with infertility to replace the negative loop with "I will be grateful if I do not have a child." Rather, a truthful cognition that is nonetheless more positive might be, "If I don't have a child, I will be sad, but I will find alternative experiences to bring me happiness."

*Except our own thoughts,
there is nothing
absolutely in our power.*

-NORMAN VINCENT PEALE

As has been written before (both in this column and elsewhere), one of the hardest aspects of infertility is the sense that something of such importance is so very much out of our control. One aspect of our experience over

which we have ultimate control is our thoughts. It takes work, including nearly constant self-examination, to recognize the nature of our negative thoughts and to confront those thoughts in an honest and productive way. Can changing your thoughts improve your chance at conception? Nobody knows for sure. But, challenging your negative thoughts can make the rest of your life – during and after the infertility – significantly more enjoyable and productive. ■

REFERENCES:

Domar, A.D. & Dreher, H. (1996). *Healing Mind, Healthy Woman: Using the Mind-Body Connection to Manage Stress and Take Control of Your Life*. Dell Publishing: New York.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ginny Wright Lapporte is a clinical psychologist in private practice near Chicago and she is the author of the book, My Very Wanted Child (Fortnight Publishing Group, Park Ridge, IL, www.myverywantedchild.com)

HUNTINGTON
Reproductive Center
MEDICAL GROUP
REPRODUCTIVE ENDOCRINOLOGY & INFERTILITY

Exclusive Medication Savings—Restrictions Apply

Bringing dreams to life since 1988.

At Huntington Reproductive Center, we provide compassionate, state-of-the-art care of the highest quality to infertile couples by individualizing our patients' treatment according to their needs.

Find out more about our:

- ♥ World-renown physicians and scientists
- ♥ Affordable financial packages
- ♥ Leading IVF surrogacy and egg donation programs
- ♥ Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis
- ♥ Gender Selection
- ♥ Oocyte Cryopreservation
- ♥ High success rates

Our Offices

Fullerton
Laguna Hills
Pasadena
Tarzana
Westlake Village
West Los Angeles

www.havingbabies.com
Toll free: (866) HRC-4IVF (472-4483)