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“Why is my mind moving backwards instead of moving forward?”

Often after a person has his/her first panic attack he/she thinks about the next one and really begins to worry about it. Unfortunately it is as if a switch gets triggered in the brain and a flow of anxious thoughts are opened up.

Each time one feels anxious it's as if things are getting worse and worse. Now I'm not suggesting that they really are getting worse, but I am suggesting that that is how it feels to the anxiety and panic attack sufferer.

Not that I am one who believes in dwelling on the negative aspects of something but I in no way want to brush over this point.

After the first panic attack or two, our brains, in a sense, go the “dark side”; we start to fear the next attack and overall see many things in a much more negative light than we did prior to the onset of our first panic attack.

It's important to recognize that this “dark side” thinking occurs for most if not all panic attack sufferers on one level or another. The problem is that while our mind is a wonderful and creative instrument, this wonderful and creative instrument unfortunately is capable of having a positive or negative influence on us.

When I say “negative influence” I'm referring to negative patterns of thought concerning the state of affairs and the impending feeling of worry that keeps sneaking into everyday tasks which makes us more and more anxious.

One of the things I can really recall about after first being stricken with panic attacks is the thought that things were getting worse the more often I became anxious.

The thought in my head would go something like this: “Well if I thought the last panic attack was bad, this one is much worse. It's getting worse.”

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I, like many people at this thought stage felt that I was losing my mind.

While it was not the case that I was losing my mind, it was the case that I felt more anxious.

However at this point I want to move on now to state that there is a way for you to move from the “dark side” to the “bright side” because the mind will move in the direction of our focus.

Now unfortunately it’s not as easy as simply flicking a switch like it seemed to be after the onset of our first or second panic attack. It does take time.

That’s why we need to consistently work on our underlying thoughts as I’ve done with the examples throughout this newsletter.

Well the same consistent, proactive, follow-through is essential to getting better.

In my newsletter I use real life examples of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in which I looked at underlying thoughts which leads to more accurate, alternative thought processes that serve as the “switch” that needs to get turned on for you to begin the road to recovery.

The great news is that you can really start a momentum in the right direction and maintain that momentum through CBT. What I mean is that by starting with the first time you really give CBT a try you continually build a momentum in creating more positive thought processes.

So now: Let’s try to go back to the above question again and analyze it for underlying cognitive distortions and then look at some alternative more realistic thoughts. In order to do this, even if this is not our current question or thought, let’s pretend it is for the moment.

The question was:

“Why is my mind moving backwards instead of moving forward?”

The first step to analyzing thoughts is actually recognizing the underlying thoughts causing our emotions - although they may not be obvious - so we need to become a detective (in a sense) and, like any technique, over time we can improve with practice.

The thought causing the above referenced distress is likely the belief that things are actually getting worse rather than better. So now we have a starting point.

When we analyze what evidence exists for the above thought (that things are actually getting worse rather than better) we will likely state that we feel more and more anxious each time we have an attack.

Now looking below at the list of cognitive distortions see if you can pick out the distortions present.

Present is emotional reasoning because what is happening is that we are reasoning the ways things are on the basis of our feeling – our emotions. However our emotions can trick us about reality. Sometimes there is no basis in reality to support our anxious thoughts other than the fact we feel anxious.

Now we need to look at a more realistic thought.

For starters, we could tell ourselves that just because we feel more and more anxious it does not mean that we are in fact worse or that our mind is really moving backwards instead of forwards. It just means that we are feeling anxious.

The great news is that we are learning to do CBT on our thoughts so that we can feel better. We can learn positive thought patterns that can make us feel better.

Even better, there is actually evidence from advanced brain imaging technology that by changing our thoughts, such as we are doing through CBT, we are improving our brain function.

Moreover you don't even need to actually believe your alternative thoughts at first. The process of continuing to generate alternative thoughts will help us over time but the first step is to go through the motions.

I'm sure you've had the experience many times where you're in a really bad mood and someone tries joking around with you. You feel so stuck in the current emotional state that you're not having it. You resist being in a better mood. Well this is what happens on an unconscious level with anxiety. You resist any thoughts that challenge your current emotional state.

But, like the example of someone trying to joke with you when you're in a bad mood, if you let yourself enjoy the humour, you actually start to laugh and feel better.

You see it's not really possible to be in a bad mood and a good mood at the same time. Just like it's not possible to be in the "dark side" and "bright side" at the same time.

By utilizing the information I discuss in this newsletter you can continue to work on the "bright side".

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Cognitive Distortions*

1. All-or-nothing thinking - Thinking of things in absolute terms, like "always", "every" or "never". Few aspects of human behavior are so absolute.
2. Overgeneralization - Taking isolated cases and using them to make wide generalizations.
3. Mental filter - Focusing exclusively on certain, usually negative or upsetting, aspects of something while ignoring the rest, like a tiny imperfection in a piece of clothing.
4. Disqualifying the positive - Continually "shooting down" positive experiences for arbitrary, ad hoc reasons.
5. Jumping to conclusions - Assuming something negative where there is no evidence to support it. Two specific subtypes are also identified:
 - o Mind reading - Assuming the intentions of others.
 - o Fortune telling - Predicting how things will turn before they happen.
6. Magnification and Minimization - Inappropriately understating or exaggerating the way people or situations truly are. Often the positive characteristics of other people are exaggerated and negative characteristics are understated. There is one subtype of magnification:
 - o Catastrophizing - Focusing on the worst possible outcome, however unlikely, or thinking that a situation is unbearable or impossible when it is really just uncomfortable.
7. Emotional reasoning - Making decisions and arguments based on how you feel rather than objective reality.

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8. Making should statements - Concentrating on what you think "should" or ought to be rather than the actual situation you are faced with, or having rigid rules which you think should always apply no matter what the circumstances are. Albert Ellis termed this "Musterbation".

9. Labeling - Explaining behaviors or events, merely by naming them; related to overgeneralization. Rather than describing the specific behavior, you assign a label to someone or yourself that puts them in absolute and unalterable terms.

10. Personalization (or attribution) - Assuming you or others directly caused things when that may not have been the case. When applied to others this is an example of blame.

*Cognitive distortion. (2008, July 9). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 00:08, July 15, 2008, from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cognitive_distortion&oldid=224669620