

A BETTER
WAY TO
THINK

Using POSITIVE THOUGHTS
to CHANGE *Your* LIFE

H. NORMAN WRIGHT



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Introduction

I've met only a few people in my life who don't want to change. Most really do. They can envision the progress they want to make. Their intentions are good.

But there's one nagging reason that keeps many of us from moving ahead in life. It's our thoughts: those seemingly insignificant sentences that pass through the mind, greatly influencing everything we say and do. From our thoughts, we hear messages that can propel us toward great accomplishments and positive change . . . or drag us into a negative spiral.

Do you struggle with your own thoughts? Thoughts of worry, insecurity, frustration, and even anger? I do. We all do.

For many of us, the thoughts that continually run through our mind are more adversary than ally. Left unchecked, our "thought life" can become our own worst enemy, poisoning us from within. And it's our choice.

Surprisingly, many of us don't see the relationship between our thoughts, our feelings, and the words that flow from our mouth. For so many of the individuals and couples I've counseled, their

difficulties can be traced back to one root problem—the ideas they repeat to themselves, their “self-talk.”

Yes, it’s true we all “talk” to ourselves. I do. You do too.

We all carry on conversations with ourselves. And it’s really okay. It’s not a sign we’re going over the edge.

Sometimes, we’re simply rehearsing conversations. At other times, we’re letting our imagination gallop along unrestrained, building tension and anxiety by worrying about possibilities that may never occur, and might not even be reasonable to consider, but telling ourselves that danger looms. It can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. What we tell ourselves, we can make come true—even if it’s something we’d desperately rather avoid.

Truth be told, most of us have a bent toward negative or toxic thinking. And for some of us, the mind is a downright dangerous place, a battlefield fraught with land mines and hidden enemies poised for ambush. Our self-talk is attacking us from within.

It doesn’t have to be that way.

You can change your thoughts. I can teach you. And when you learn to control your self-talk, you’ll be on your way to changing your life and improving your relationships. It’s possible. Really. The practical, simple steps you’ll find in this book will make a difference. What’s more, you’ll build a foundation for new thinking based on the Word of God. Get ready—you’re on your way to the ultimate mental makeover.

As you work through this book, I pray you’ll develop a new pattern of thinking, one that is balanced and realistic. My hope is that you’ll discover how to make peace with your mind, allowing you to make the most of all God has for you.

— H. Norman Wright

1

My Mind Is Filled with Thoughts!

No matter what the weather, Melanie radiates sunshine. At the grocery store, she makes friendly small talk with the cashier. When working in the yard, she always raises her eyes at the sound of an approaching car and waves, flashing a bright smile as neighbors drive by. Sure, she has bad days now and then. But she bounces back quickly after unpleasant events or periods of stress. Nothing seems to keep her down for long.

It's no act. Melanie really does see a blessing in almost everything. When she gets stuck in a traffic snarl that might leave others seething, she tells herself it's simply an opportunity to have some uninterrupted prayer time. If she burns dinner, she tells herself that she was due for a fun night out at a favorite eatery. Rained-out picnic plans cause her to announce that it's the perfect opportunity to gather the family around the TV for a cozy afternoon watching a movie and munching popcorn.

When a problem erupts in her life, her mind spins into solution-finding mode. She's not prone to worry. Things are probably better than they seem, she often tells herself. And usually, she's right.

Things always seem to work out for Melanie. So why can't my life go like that? Rhonda often wonders. The two have known each other since elementary school and have attended the same church ever since, serving together in countless ministries since they were teens.

She always has energy, and never even gets sick! muses Rhonda. And I'm always battling allergies, fatigue, or a cold.

The truth is, Rhonda has always found Melanie's can-do spirit a little annoying. Actually, really annoying. No one can be *that* happy, Rhonda pouts on days when the two serve coffee together at church.

Rhonda has a comfortable life—her husband makes a far bigger salary than Melanie's, and she doesn't have any real problems. Still, she feels gloomy a lot. And, she admits to her husband from time to time, she probably spends more time than she should fretting about imagined problems that never materialize.

But I can't help it, she tells herself.

She's tried the whole "don't worry until you really have something to worry about" approach. But that just seems so irresponsible.

What if we catch that really nasty flu that's going around, right before our vacation? she frets. What if the dog works his nose under the loose board on the fence, and gets out and gets hit by a car while I'm at the store? What if there's a downturn at Rob's business, and he loses his job? We could lose the house! Our savings! Everything!

What-ifs whirl through her head throughout each day. And she never really feels good anymore, though her doctor can't find anything wrong with her.

Swirling in Thoughts

Thoughts—optimistic, pessimistic, and everything in between—flit through our minds all day long. And they affect everything about us, from our emotions to our health. Melanie’s cheerful, positive thoughts influence just about every part of her life, from her attitude and mood to her health—and there’s science to prove it.

Rhonda’s negative thoughts affect her more than she realizes—stealing her joy, damaging her relationships, even damaging her health. There’s science to prove that too.

Like these two women, we’re constantly processing thoughts. We couldn’t possibly count the number of thoughts we have each day. There are far too many. Would you guess a thousand? Five thousand? Ten thousand? Depending on how active your mind is, you may produce more than 45,000 thoughts a day. Whew! It might be compared to a flock of birds flying in and out of your mind.

Depending on how active your mind is, you may produce more than 45,000 thoughts a day.

The rate at which we can express those thoughts is far slower. Some research suggests we speak at about 200 words per minute. But we can listen to and process 1,300 words per minute!

This barrage of thoughts can overwhelm us. Sometimes it seems we can’t process them all fast enough. Sometimes we know what we’re thinking, but can’t form the words to express those ideas. Sound familiar?

So what exactly *are* thoughts? Well, they’re the ways in which we’re conscious of things. They’re made up of our memories, our perceptions, our beliefs. They’re glimpses, even snippets, of ideas. They make up one of the most basic facets of life.

Sometimes they pass fleetingly, barely noticed. Sometimes they come sharply into focus. We often voice them, saying things like, “I thought of you yesterday,” or “I was just thinking of our meeting tomorrow.”

Our thoughts determine the orientation of everything we do. They evoke the feelings that frame our world and motivate our actions. And they have the power to change the way we feel.

Melanie’s sunny thoughts shine through in her mood. She’s optimistic most of the time, even when problems arise. Life just feels good to her.

But for Rhonda, even when life offers smooth sailing, she rationalizes the possibility of storm clouds forming just beyond the horizon. Worry gnaws at her as she remains on the lookout for potential problems.

Think about this: You can’t evoke thoughts by *feeling* a certain way. But you *can* evoke and, to some degree, control feelings by directing your thoughts.

So having control over our own thoughts gives us power to direct our feelings. But our feelings aren’t directed solely by will. We can’t just choose our feelings. Still, we *can* guide them with our thoughts.

That’s important because our thoughts are the origin of our behaviors. Each behavior begins this way: A thought stimulates an electrochemical response, which produces emotion; emotion results in an attitude; attitude produces behavior. This process affects the way we think and feel physically. So negative or toxic thoughts produce toxic emotions. Those produce toxic attitudes, which result in toxic behavior.

Our ability to think and represent things to ourselves also enables us to bring vast ranges of reality—and nonreality—into our lives. Basically, that means that with our thoughts, we can usher

good or bad things into our lives, real or imagined, depending on the content of our thoughts.

Welcome to Thought Chemistry 101

Are your thoughts harmless or harmful? Well, it depends.

It's important to understand that our thoughts aren't isolated or disconnected. Each time you have a thought, it triggers an electrochemical reaction in your body, whether you're aware of it or not.

That's right, each thought sets off a biological process—about 400 billion at once. Because of that thought, chemicals surge through the body, producing electromagnetic waves. Those set off emotions, which affect how we behave.

We listen to our emotions and act upon them. For instance, when we're fearful or worried, we may act by withdrawing, or attacking, or blowing a situation out of proportion.¹ Whenever you have a thought, and that electrical transmission goes across your brain in a fraction of a second, you become aware of what you're thinking.

Each time you have a thought, it triggers an electrochemical reaction in your body, whether you're aware of it or not.

Ever wonder, when you're feeling good, why you're feeling so good? Why you're feeling positive or happy?

There's a simple reason for this. It's due to those chemical reactions set off in your brain as a result of your thoughts. Bad feelings and attitudes arise from this process too.

That's because some of the chemicals that are triggered by our thoughts are “feel-good” chemicals; others are “downers.”

How Your Thoughts Shape Your Character

You may wonder, aside from affecting our moods, does it really matter what we think? We're just talking about harmless thoughts, right?

Wrong. The truth is, the content of your thoughts matters a lot. You see, our thoughts can limit who we are and what we become, or they can act as the catalyst prompting us forward in our lives.

Our thoughts influence our character, shape our attitudes, determine our behaviors, affect our spirituality, and even influence the immune system, says author, educator, and psychologist Archibald Hart.² "Your thinking determines whether you will be happy or sad most of the time. It even determines if you'll get married and whether your sex life will be satisfying," he says.³

Let's assume this day isn't going so well for you. There have been frustrations and setbacks—other people not following through on commitments, loved ones not paying attention to your concerns, children misbehaving. You're feeling like Rhonda usually does, like nothing ever goes her way.

Now you have some angry, unkind, or cranky thoughts—and there's a consequence. Your brain releases chemicals that cause physical reactions. You may feel your muscles tense, your heart pound, your hands sweat. The body is a receptacle for every negative thought we have, and it reacts to each one.

Imagine the difference if you viewed your day as Melanie does, with a positive take on whatever comes your way. You'd skip all the unpleasant emotions and physical reactions that accompany negative thinking.

Your Thoughts and Your Health

Thoughts can create stress in our life. And it's been well documented that stress negatively affects health in many ways.

Humor, on the other hand, helps your brain function in a healthy way. In reacting to humor, both sides of the brain are activated simultaneously. When you tell a joke, the left side—the part responsible for thinking—starts firing. When you “get” a joke and start laughing, your right side becomes active.

Research indicates that people tend to be more creative when they see something as funny. Other studies suggest that laughter helps increase the flexibility and creativity of thinking. Humor even has been used to help strengthen the immune system.⁴

Thoughts create emotions that can have a lasting physical effect on your body. For example, when we dwell on old hurts and wounds, we build a mental habit. Every time we think about that pain from the past, stress—and its toxic effects—surfaces with increasing speed. Each time we think that negative thought, we build a stronger pathway to that negative emotion, and we’re more likely to express ourselves in a negative way.

Our emotional pain can even trigger physical pain or damage. Researchers have linked toxic thoughts to heart and vascular problems, gastrointestinal problems, headaches, skin conditions, intestinal tract disorders, chronic pain, lung and breathing disorders, and immune impairment.⁵

Consider this, from Dr. Caroline Leaf’s *Who Switched Off My Brain?*:

Research shows that around 87% of illnesses can be attributed to our thought life, and approximately 13% to diet, genetics and environment. Studies conclusively link more chronic diseases (also known as lifestyle diseases) to an epidemic of toxic emotions in our culture. These toxic emotions can cause migraines, hypertension, strokes, cancer, skin problems, diabetes, infections and allergies, just to name a few.⁶

As a negative thought begins to develop, it activates a section of the brain that releases emotions related to the thought. If it's a negative—or toxic—thought, one of those insidious “downer” chemicals is released, stimulating the release of another, which stimulates the release of yet another.

Chemicals released by negative emotions can affect your brain's nerve cells, causing difficulty in retrieving memories. That, in turn, suppresses the ability to remember and think in a constructive way. Chemicals released in the brain as a result of positive thoughts don't cause this kind of damage, research shows.

Toxic thoughts impact both emotional and physical balance. The hormones released can disrupt positive brain functioning,⁷ making it difficult for us to concentrate or focus.

The good news is that our thoughts also can create a calmness that helps control our emotions, reining them in before they spin out of control. Every positive or happy thought spurs your brain to action, releasing chemicals that make your body feel good.

Why Self-Talk Matters

This is where the power of self-talk is so evident. Self-talk is simply the thoughts you tell yourself. For example, Melanie may step out of the house, notice it's raining, and think, “Great, the yard needed some water.” On the other hand, her friend Rhonda, who feeds herself a steady diet of negative self-talk, would probably think, “Oh, rats! Now I'll get my hair and shoes wet. And it will be rough driving in to work. And I'll probably catch a cold. And . . .” You get the picture.

Thoughts follow specific pathways in the brain. When a thought occurs, the part of the brain called the thalamus goes to work making sense of the information and running it through the part

of the brain that stores memories, the amygdala. In her book, Dr. Leaf notes:

Remember that the amygdala is much like a library and is responsible for the first emotional response to any thought. It activates and arouses you to do something. If your “library” is filled with “books” that tell a story about not being able to cope with the incoming information, the response will be to react to the information based purely on an emotional level. This is why it is never wise to react to the first emotion you feel. It is a physiological response designed to alert and focus you, not to direct your actions.⁸

When your thoughts are toxic or negative, you’ve handed off control to your emotions, chemical reactions that aren’t always reliable. Part of the amygdala’s purpose is to alert us. But unless it’s steadied with nontoxic, balanced thoughts, the emotions it generates can dominate.⁹ And that can cause a negative, even irrational, response.

That’s why memories, even those we don’t consciously recall, can have powerful effects. Even if they’re not readily accessed by the brain, so-called hidden memories still exist. Their information isn’t lost; it’s stored somewhere in the mind. It’s as if those memories are burned onto the hard drive of the mind, and when we hit the right keys to trigger them, they reappear clearly to us.

We all have memories hidden somewhere beyond our conscious memory, blocked because the event was extremely painful or traumatic. It’s as though God has built into the functioning of our mind the ability to repress emotionally painful material. Some of these memories stay there until our subconscious minds believe it’s “safe” to access them.

We need to remember that, like so many other things, accessing memories is a biological process.

Which memories did you activate today? Were they negative or positive? Did they hinder your life or enhance it?

We Are What We Think

You *can* learn to control your thoughts that change your brain's chemistry, affect your emotions, and even influence your character.

And that means you can have significant control over your physical well-being too.

Pastor and author Charles Swindoll describes the power we have to direct our thoughts:

Thoughts, positive or negative, grow stronger together when fertilized with constant repetition. That may explain why so many who are gloomy and gray stay in that mood, and why others who are cheery and enthusiastic continue to be so, even in the midst of difficult circumstances. Please do not misunderstand. Happiness (like winning) is a matter of right thinking, not intelligence, age or position. Our performance is directly related to the thoughts we deposit in our memory bank. We can only draw on what we deposit.

What kind of performance would your car deliver if every morning before you left for work you scooped up a handful of dirt and put it in your crankcase? The fine tuned engine would soon be coughing and sputtering. Ultimately, it would refuse to start. The same is true of your life. Thoughts about yourself and attitudes toward others that are narrow, destructive and abrasive produce wear and tear on your mental motor. They send you off the road while others drive past.¹⁰

Stop for a moment and reflect on your thought life. What type of deposits do you usually make?

Science simply confirms what Scripture has been saying all along: We are shaped, in large part, by our thoughts. Why else would the great apostle Paul say, "Fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right" (Phil. 4:8 TLB)?

The Scriptures have much more to say about the act of thinking and our thought life. The words *think*, *thought*, and *mind* are

used hundreds of times in the Bible. The writer of Proverbs 23:7 states succinctly: “As he thinks within himself, so he is” (NASB).

Often the Scriptures refer to the heart as the source of our thoughts:

The heart of the righteous weighs its answers,
but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil. (Prov. 15:28 NIV)

But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man “unclean.” For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. (Matt. 15:18–19 NIV)

God, of course, knows the content of our thoughts:

All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirits (the thoughts and intents of the heart). (Prov. 16:2 AMP)

Our Creator designed us so that our thoughts have an impact on every aspect of life. Positive thoughts bring about positive effects. Negative thoughts take everything—from attitude to health—in the opposite direction. No wonder the author of Proverbs wrote,

A cheerful heart is good medicine,
but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.
(Prov. 17:22 NIV)

He knew what modern science has confirmed: Negative thoughts are a form of pollution to our body. What’s more, our thoughts—good and bad—affect what we say and do. Jesus said,

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks. (Luke 6:45 NIV)

Are your thoughts shaping you? Or are you shaping your thoughts? And what are your thoughts producing?

If you're not in control of your mind, who *is*? Who has control of what you think? You, or God? Think about this.

Clearly, our thoughts feed our emotions, and our emotions affect our health. So you know you must beware of negative self-talk—it's toxic. But we aren't helpless victims of our thoughts. We can choose how they affect us. We simply must learn how to direct their course.

Taking Control

"I wish my mind wasn't so scattered."

"My mind feels so divided."

"My thoughts are so fragmented."

I've asked people who make these statements, "Is that the first time you've said that?" They look at me like I've lost my senses. Usually, they confess that those statements have been constant companions. No wonder they feel this way!

When we repeat any statement enough, even unintentionally, we can cause it, over time, to become reality. Again, let's think about Rhonda. When she repeats to herself over and over that she's probably going to have a bad day—guess what? She experiences so many negative emotions—and even significant physiological reactions, such as upset stomach, headache, or nervousness—that other problems occur, and simply as a result of her negative self-talk, she does, indeed, have a bad day.

Now, it's all right to repeat statements. In fact, we're going to repeat many of them the rest of our lives.

But we need to beware of negative statements, especially about our own minds. We don't have to feel scattered, divided, and fragmented. We've been given more than that as believers.

The Bible promises the believer a sound, well-balanced mind. In 2 Timothy, Paul writes, “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity (of cowardice, of craven and cringing and fawning fear), but [He has given us a spirit] of power and of love and of calm *and well-balanced mind and discipline and self-control*” (1:7 AMP, emphasis added).

Scriptural teaching about our thoughts is not just informative; it’s encouraging—and potentially life changing. Memorizing and dwelling upon this Scripture can help bring order to your thought life and, as a result, improve your relationships, health, and happiness.

Imagine the impact if we countered every thought about being scattered, divided, and fragmented with this forceful self-talk: “Stop—that’s not true!”

Imagine the power of repeating the encouraging passage from 2 Timothy 1:7 aloud. This can become a self-fulfilling prophecy too. And the result? A person who is calm, disciplined, and self-controlled, with a well-balanced mind, can create more of this positive, self-fulfilling prophecy.

So yes, you really can:

Think yourself healthy.

Think yourself successful.

Think yourself out of worry and anxiety.

Think yourself out of bitterness and resentment.

Think yourself into forgiving.

Think yourself in control of your emotions.

Think yourself out of stress.

Think yourself happy.

The possibilities are limitless!

Some people say they feel they're responsible *to* their mind. The problem with that is we've given control to whatever is raging. When we give our mind control, we think we have to go along with whatever upset, worry, anxiety, or depressive thought might be occurring. Being responsible to it means going along with whatever's occurring.

You can learn to be responsible *for* your mind. And that's essentially what Scripture instructs us to do. We can learn to direct our mind to reflect God's will. And because experiencing emotions based on thinking this way is a biochemical event, following scriptural principles creates a different biochemical solution, the kind that God desires for us. Clearly, it's a better way to live.

Your thoughts—and their biochemical reactions—shape your emotional and physical health. I repeat this for a reason—so you'll be conscious of this as you go about your daily life. It's a new thought that can impact your life in a new way.

New thoughts or old memories—both can direct your life. It's possible to change and control them. In this book, you'll learn how.

Reflect and Remember

1. Your life is directed by your thoughts. Your thoughts create your behavior.
2. Your thoughts affect the chemistry in your brain.
3. Your thoughts and your emotions are closely linked. Toxic thoughts create negative emotions.
4. You can learn to be responsible for your mind. We are what we think.
5. God knows our thoughts. God gives us a well-balanced mind.
6. What happened in your life today because of what you thought?
