

How analyzing your problems may be counterproductive

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When you're upset or depressed, should you analyze your feelings to figure out what's wrong? Or should you just forget about it and move on? New research and theories suggests if you do want to think about your problems, do so from a detached perspective, rather than reliving the experience.

This answer is related to a psychological paradox: Processing emotions is supposed to help you facilitate coping, but attempts to understand painful feelings often backfire and perpetuate or strengthen negative moods and emotions. The solution seems to be neither denial or distraction, according to research conducted by University of Michigan psychologist Ethan Kross, who says the best way to move forward emotionally is to examine one's feelings from a distance or detached perspective.

Kross, along with University of California colleague Ozelm Ayduk, conducted a series of studies that provide the first experimental evidence of the benefits of taking a detached perspective on your problems. Kross says, "reviewing our mistakes over and over, re-experiencing the same negative emotions we felt the first time, tends to keep us stuck in negativity." Their study, published in the July, 2008 issue of **Personality and Social Psychology**, described how they randomly assigned 141 participants to groups that required them to focus (or not to focus) on their feelings using different strategies in a guided imagery exercise that led them to recall an experience that made them feel overwhelmed by sadness or depression. In the immersed-analysis condition, participants were told to go back to the time and place of the experience and relive it as if it were happening to them over again, and try to understand the emotions they felt, along with the underlying causes. In the detached-analysis condition, the subjects were told to go back the time and place of the experience, take a few steps back and move away from the experience, and watch it unfold as though it was happening to them from a distance, and try to understand what they felt and the reasons for the feelings-- what lessons are to be learned.

The results of the experiment? Immediately after the exercise the distanced-analysis approach subjects reported lower levels of anxiety, depression and sadness compared to those subjects who used the immersed-analysis strategy. One week later the participants were questioned. Those that had used the distanced-analysis strategy continued to show lower levels of depression, anxiety and sadness. In a related study, Ayduk and Kross showed that participants who adopted a self-distanced perspective while thinking about their problems related to anger, showed reductions in blood pressure.

Kross' and Ayduk's research supports the work done by psychotherapist Dr. Steven

Hayes. Traditional cognitive psychotherapy may not be the best intervention according to Dr. Steven Hayes, a renowned psychotherapist, and author of **Getting Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life**. Hayes has been setting the world of psychotherapy on its ear by advocating a totally different approach.

Hayes and researchers Marsha Linehan and Robert Kohlenberg at the University of Washington, and Zindel Segal at the University of Toronto, what we could call "Third Wave Psychologists" are focusing less on how to manipulate the content of our thoughts (a focus on cognitive psychotherapy) and more on how to change their context--to modify the way we see thoughts and feelings so they can't control our behavior. Whereas cognitive therapists speak of "cognitive errors" and "distorted interpretation," Hayes and his colleagues encourage mindfulness, the meditation-inspired practice of observing thoughts without getting entangled by them--imagine the thoughts being a leaf or canoe floating down the stream.

These Third Wave Psychologists would argue that trying to correct negative thoughts can paradoxically actually intensify them. As NLP trained coaches would say, telling someone to "not think about a blue tree," actually focuses their mind on a blue tree. The Third Wave Psychologists methodology is called ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy), which says that we should acknowledge that negative thoughts recur throughout our life and instead of challenging or fighting with them, we should concentrate on identifying and committing to our values in life. Hayes would argue that once we are willing to feel our negative emotions, we'll find it easier to commit ourselves to what we want in life.

This approach may come as a surprise to many, because the traditional cognitive model permeates our culture and the media as reflected in the Dr. Phil show. The essence of the conflict between traditional cognitive psychologists and psychotherapists is to engage in a process of analyzing your way out your problems, or the Third Wave approach which says, accept that you have negative beliefs, thinking and problems and focus on what you want. Third Wave psychologists acknowledge that we have pain, but rather than trying to push it away, they say trying to push it away or deny it just gives it more energy and strength.

Third Wave Psychologists focus on acceptance and commitment comes with a variety of strategies to help people including such things as writing your epitaph (what's going to be your legacy), clarifying your values and committing your behavior to them.

It's interesting that that The Third Wave Psychologists approach comes along at a time when more and more people are looking for answer outside of the traditional medical model (which psychiatry and traditional psychotherapy represent). Just look at a 2002 study in **Prevention and Treatment**, which found that 80% people tested who took the six most popular antidepressants of the 1990's got the same results when they took a sugar pill placebo.

The Third Wave Psychologists approaches are very consistent with much of the training and approach that many life coaches receive, inclusive of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), and many spiritual approaches to behavioral changes reflected in ancient Buddhist teachings and the more modern version exemplified by Eckhart Tolle (**The Power of Now and A New Earth**). The focus of those approaches reinforces the concepts of acceptance of negative emotions and thoughts, and rather than giving them energy and fighting with them, focus on mindfulness, and a commitment to an alignment of values and behavior.

What's fascinating is how brain science and psychological research is supporting ancient spiritual practices. Perhaps now the East and the West, science and spirituality, are coming together.

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