

Opening our eyes
Choosing thoughts, accepting feelings
by Nan Dickie

Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish our thoughts from our feelings, especially if we are in the habit of hiding our feelings, or have come to believe that it's safer to think than to feel. We may try to ignore thoughts and feelings if they make us uncomfortable. We do this at our own peril, as thoughts and feelings don't just dissolve if and when we wish them to.

Although we may not choose to accept it, much of our thinking is very much under our control. We can actually choose our thoughts, and we can rephrase them, if that is wise.

We may have a knee jerk reaction to a thought, such as, "I shouldn't have such negative feelings about myself." We can accept that thought or challenge it. We may decide we need to change our thinking about this. We always have the choice to change our thoughts. Always.

For instance, let's say I find myself thinking, "So-and-so is ignoring me because she knows I am depressed." My knee-jerk reaction (thought) might be, "She's cruel." If I catch myself right then, I might re-consider, "Maybe she's embarrassed because she doesn't know what to say to me." And then I could decide that I can approach her and say, "I know it's hard to know what to say to me when I'm depressed. Just 'I'm sorry to hear you're not feeling well these days,' would be great." What a difference!

Feelings are another matter. Feelings exist within us, and sometimes in spite of us. They just are. We can't pretend that we don't have a particular feeling; nor can we pretend we have a feeling that doesn't exist, as much as we wish it did. So, the best thing is to acknowledge and accept the feeling, however uncomfortable it is, and look at it. Sometimes we choose not to do this as we may fear what our feelings may be trying to tell us.

I may feel (and it's happened too often), "I'm worthless—I've been depressed for months now, and I can't get myself out of it." I may have a knee-jerk reaction to that feeling, chastising myself with, "You're stupid to feel this way." But I do feel worthless, which is common when one is depressed.

I can't just change a feeling because I don't want to have it. Feelings don't work that way. So, what can I do about it? I can accept that I am feeling worthless, be kind to myself by knowing it's part of the illness, and I know that it doesn't say anything about my true value. I can change my thought to, "Oh, yes. I recognize this feeling of

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worthlessness. It happens every time I get depressed.” This is self-compassion at play.

As human beings, living with or without mental disorders, we have so many more choices than we could ever imagine about what we think, and how to respond to how we feel. Let’s be pro-active, and do the best for our, and others’, well-being.

[Nan Dickie is the facilitator of a peer-led depression support group in Salmon Arm. Meetings are held the first and third Mondays at Askews Uptown community room at noon. Everyone, including supporters, welcome. Info: ndickie@telus.net; 250 832-3733.]