

THINKING vs
OBSERVING



DR SUSAN KRIEGLER

THINKING vs OBSERVING

BASED ON AN EXTRACT FROM "THE HAPPINESS TRAP" BY RUSS HARRIS

Did anyone ever chide you for not listening? And did you ever reply, "Sorry, I was somewhere else"? Well, if you were "somewhere else," then where you? And how did you get back again?

It is very useful to teach yourself to recognize two different parts of yourself: the "thinking self" and the "**observing self**." The thinking self is the part of you that thinks, plans, judges, compares, creates, imagines, visualizes, analyses, remembers, daydreams, and fantasizes. A more common name for it is the "mind." Popular psychological approaches such as positive thinking, cognitive therapy, creative visualization, hypnosis, and neuro-linguistic programming all focus on controlling the way your thinking self operates. This is all great in theory and it appeals to our common sense, but as you may have seen, the thinking self is not that easy to control. It's not that we have no control – it's just that we have much less control than the "experts" would have us believe.

The observing self is fundamentally different from the thinking self. The observing self is aware but does not think; it is the part of you that is responsible for focus, attention, and awareness. While it can observe or pay attention to your thoughts, it can't produce them. Whereas the thinking self thinks about your experience, the observing self registers your experience directly.

For example, if you are playing tennis and you are truly focused, then all your attention is riveted on that ball coming towards you. This is your observing self at work. You are not thinking about the ball; you are observing it.

Now, suppose thoughts start popping into your head like, "I hope my grip is correct," "I'd better make this a good hit," or "Wow, that ball is moving fast!" That is your thinking self at work. And of course, such thoughts can often be distracting. If your observing self pays too much attention to those thoughts, then it is no longer focused on the ball, and your performance will be impaired. (How often have you been focused on a task, only to be distracted by a thought such as, "I hope I don't screw this up!"/?)

Or suppose you're watching a magnificent sunset. There are moments when your mind is quiet, when you're simply noticing the spectacle before you. This is your observing self at work: observing, not thinking. But those silent moments don't last long. Your thinking self kicks in: "Wow! Look at all those colours! This reminds me of that sunset we saw on vacation last year. I wish I had my camera." **And the more attention your observing self pays to the running commentary of the thinking self, the more you lose direct contact with that sunset.**

Although we all understand words such as “awareness,” “focus,” and “attention,” most of us in the Western world have little or no concept of the observing self. As a result, there is no common word for it in the English language. We only have the word “mind,” which is generally used to denote both the thinking self and the observing self, without distinguishing between the two. To reduce confusion, whenever I use the word “mind”, I am referring only to the thinking self. When I use terms like “attention,” “observing,” “noticing,” and “direct experience,” I’m referring to various aspects of the observing self. To free yourself from the destructive habit of being caught up in the thoughts in your mind, you can learn how to tune in and use this amazingly potent part of you. Let’s begin right now with a simple exercise.

Two Distinct Processes

Close your eyes for about a minute and simply notice what your mind does. Stay on the lookout for any thoughts or images, as if you were a wildlife photographer waiting for an exotic animal to emerge from the undergrowth. If no thoughts or images appear, keep watching; sooner or later they will show themselves – I guarantee it. Notice where those thoughts or images seem to locate in front of you, above you, behind you, to one side of you, or within you. Once you’ve done this for a minute, open your eyes again.

That’s all there is to it. So, read through these instructions once again; and give it a try.

What you experienced were two distinct processes going on. First there was the process of thinking – in other words, some thoughts or images appeared. Then there was the process of observing; that is, you were able to notice or observe those thoughts and images. It’s important to experience the distinction between thinking and observing. Try the above exercise once more. Close your eyes for about a minute, notice what thoughts or images appear, and notice where they seem to be located.

Hopefully, this little exercise gave you a sense of distance between you and your thoughts: thoughts and images appeared, then disappeared again, and you were able to notice them come and go. Another way of putting this is that your thinking self produced some thoughts, and your observing self observed them.

Our thinking self is a bit like a radio, constantly playing in the background. Most of the time it’s the Radio Doom and Gloom Show, broadcasting negative stories twenty-four hours a day. It reminds us of bad things from the past, it warns us of bad things to come in the future, and it gives us regular updates on everything that’s wrong with us. Once in a while it broadcasts something useful or cheerful, but not too often. So, if we’re constantly tuned in to this radio, listening to it intently and, worse, believing everything we hear, then we have a sure-fire recipe for stress and misery.

Unfortunately, there's no way to switch off this radio. Even Zen masters are unable to achieve such a feat. Sometimes the radio will stop of its own accord for a few seconds (or even – very rarely – for a few minutes). But we just don't have the power to make it stop (unless we short-circuit it with drugs, alcohol, or brain surgery). In fact, generally speaking, the more we try to make this radio stop, the louder it plays.

But there is an alternative approach. Have you ever had a radio playing in the background, but you were so intent on what you were doing that you didn't really listen to it? You could hear the radio playing, but you weren't paying attention to it. In practicing diffusion skills, we are ultimately aiming to do precisely that with our thoughts. Once we know that thoughts are just bits of language, we can treat them like background noise – we can let them come and go without focusing on them and without being bothered by them.

So, here's what we're aiming for with diffusion skills:

- *If the thinking self is broadcasting something unhelpful, the observing self need not pay it much attention. The observing self can simply acknowledge the thought, then turn its attention to what you are doing here and now.*
- *If the thinking self is broadcasting something useful or helpful, then the observing self can tune in and pay attention.*

This is very different from approaches such as positive thinking, which are like airing a second radio show, Radio Happy and Cheerful, alongside Radio Doom and Gloom, in the hope of drowning it out. It's pretty hard to stay focused on what you're doing when you have two radios playing different tunes in the background.

Notice, too, that letting the radio play on without giving it much attention is very different from actively trying to ignore it. Have you ever heard a radio playing and tried not to listen to it? What happened? The more you tried not to hear it, the more it bothered you, right?

The ability to let thoughts come and go in the background while you keep your attention on what you are doing is very useful. Suppose you're in a social situation and your mind is saying, "I'm so boring! I have nothing to say. I wish I could go home!" It's hard to have a good conversation if you're giving all your attention to those thoughts. Similarly, suppose you're learning to drive, and your thinking self is saying, "I can't do it. It's too hard. I'm going to crash!" It's hard to drive well if your observing self is focused to those thoughts rather than on the road. The following technique will teach you how to let your thoughts "pass on by" while you keep your attention on what you're doing. First read the instructions, then give it a try.

Ten Deep Breaths

Take ten deep breaths, as slowly as possible. (You may prefer to do this with your eyes closed.) Now focus on the rise and fall of your stomach and the air moving in and out of your lungs. Notice the sensations as the air flows in with your diaphragm relaxing down into your stomach cavity, your belly expanding and your lungs expanding. Notice what you feel as the air flows out: your stomach gently contracting, your diaphragm floating up into your chest cavity and the breath leaving your nostrils. Focus on completely emptying your lungs. Push out every last bit of air, feeling your lungs deflate, and pause for a moment before breathing in again. As you breathe in, notice how your tummy gently pushes outward.

Now let any thoughts and images come and go in the background, as if they were cars passing by outside your house. When a new thought or image appears, briefly **acknowledge its presence**, as if you were nodding at a passing motorist. As you do this, **keep your attention on the breath**, following the air, as it flows in and out of your lungs. You may find it helpful to silently say to yourself, “Thinking,” whenever a thought or image appears. Many people find this helps them to acknowledge and let go of the thought. Give it a try, and if it’s helpful, keep doing it.

From time to time a thought will capture your attention; it will “hook you” and “carry you away” so that you lose track of the exercise. The moment you realize you’ve been hooked, take a second to notice what distracted you; then gently “unhook” yourself and refocus on your breathing.

Now read through the instructions once more and try it.

How did it go? Most people get hooked up and carried away by their thoughts several times during that exercise. This is how thoughts typically affect us: they reel us in, pulling our attention away from what we’re doing. (So, although we may say that our mind wanders, this is not accurate. In reality, it’s our attention that wanders.)

By regularly practicing this diffusion technique, you will learn three important skills: **(1) how to let thoughts come and go, without focusing on them, (2) how to recognize when you’re been “hooked” by your thoughts, and (3) how to gently “unhook yourself” and refocus your attention.**

When practicing this technique, notice the distinction between your thinking self and observing self. (The observing self focuses on the breath, while the thinking self chatters away in the background.) Notice also that **this is an acceptance strategy, not a control strategy**. We aren’t trying to avoid or get rid of unwanted thoughts; we’re simply allowing them to be there, to come and go as they please.

Fortunately, this is an easy technique to practice, because you can do it anytime, anywhere. Therefore, aim to practice this exercise through the day while you're stuck at traffic lights, waiting in line, on hold on the telephone, waiting for an appointment, during commercial breaks on the TV, and even in bed, last thing at night. Basically, try it anytime you have a moment to spare. (If you don't have time for the full ten breaths, even three or four can be useful.) In particular, try it anytime you realize that you're all caught up in your thoughts. When you're doing this technique, it doesn't matter how many times you get hooked. ***Each time you notice it and unhook yourself, you're getting more proficient at a valuable skill.***

When doing this technique, let go of any expectations; simply notice what effect it has when you do it. Observing your thoughts and your breath in this way is in fact the foundation of mindful meditation. Most modern approaches to stress, anxiety and depression use mindfulness as a cornerstone of effective therapy.

I've designed the above brief exercises for busy people who as they say they "don't have enough time in the day" to do formal diffusion practice. However, "not enough time" is just another story. So, here's a challenge for you: if you really want to get good at this, then as well as doing all those brief exercises, put aside five minutes twice a day to practice focusing on your breath. For example, you may do five minutes first thing in the morning and five minutes during your lunch break. During these times, keep your attention totally on your breath, while letting your thoughts come and go like passing cars. And each time you notice your attention has wandered, gently refocus. Also, if you haven't already tried it, then try silently saying to yourself, "Thinking," whenever a thought appears. (Some people find this diffusion technique very helpful, but if you don't, then don't bother.)

Realistic Expectations

Your mind will never stop telling you unpleasant stories (at least, not for long) – that's just what minds do. So, let's be realistic. The fact is, you will get hooked up and reeled in by these stories again and again. That's the bad news.

The good news is you can make dramatic improvements. You can learn to get hooked much less often. You can learn to recognize much faster when you have been hooked, and you can learn to get much better at unhooking yourself. All these abilities will help to keep you out of this particular (un-)happiness trap.

Susan Kriegler
Ph.D(Psig.) D.Ed.

181 Beckett Street
Arcadia
Pretoria
0083

+27(0)60 621 5398
reception.smk@yebo.co.za
www.susankriegler.com
www.Facebook.com/DrSusanKriegler

Dr Susan Kriegler is a highly renowned psychologist from Pretoria, South Africa. She consults from her practice as well as online to clients in more than 7 countries. To schedule an appointment, or for more reading material as well as Audio & Video downloads, please visit www.susankriegler.com.

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