**4 Ways to Avoid Negative Thoughts**

**How We Experience Our Critical Voice**

People “do not hear voices, per se,” Coyne explained. “But we do notice critical thoughts popping up as we go through our days.” She stated that “we have evolved to experience our thoughts as literal truths. It’s what allows us to learn indirectly by listening to what other people say, rather than only directly through our own experience.”

Our inner voice, Coyne stated, “is always on, and it’s overinclusive in its estimation of what is threatening.” These are “features, not bugs” of our critical voice, she said. “It wouldn’t be a great threat detector if you could turn it off at will, and it wouldn’t be a great threat detector if it somehow underestimated threats, right?”

**Getting Stuck**

Our nonstop, always cautious critical voice, Coyne said, is “an incredible ability, a boon to our survival, but also comes with a dark side.”

“People run into trouble when they get stuck listening to their mind solely, rather than being out in the world and noticing that sometimes the mind isn’t correct about what it thinks,” Coyne stated.

The critical voice, she said, can cause people to “focus solely on avoiding unwanted thoughts and to avoid situations that trigger those thoughts.” This is defined as “experiential avoidance.”

“If it’s our default for managing unwanted thoughts, it can trap us, such that we lose our focus on other, more important things in our lives,” said Coyne. “The problem? Not only does this focus on getting stuff out of our heads capture our attention, but it also often backfires—sometimes the more you try not to think about something, the more it sticks around.”

According to Coyne, the critical voice is a crucial part of our lives, even though sometimes it can take over our thoughts

Coyne offered a real-world example of how this works: “My mind may say something like ‘Better not speak up in that meeting, people will think you are stupid, and that would be embarrassing.’ I might experience a physical reaction (my heart rate might increase). Or an emotional reaction (I’ll feel nervous).

And, of course, I’d have a cognitive reaction (should I not speak up? What’s the right thing to say so I don’t look stupid?). This is important because we also treat unpleasant or unwanted thoughts—even though they are just thoughts—as actual truths that we must avoid, or fix, or suppress, or change.”

Detaching From That Critical Voice

“Having a critical, threat-detecting mind isn’t the problem,” Coyne asserted. “Rather, it’s our response to that critical mind that can trap us.”

To avoid these, Coyne reported that some people engage with mental health professionals by using cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). “This approach will teach you skills for how to manage these types of thoughts by helping you undermine their faulty logic or overestimation of threat,” she explained.

Approaches like acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) or acceptance-based behavior therapy can also be helpful. These methods, Coyne said, “help you change your relationship to your thoughts, such that you become more skilled at noticing them mindfully and making a space for them without reacting so that you are no longer hooked by them.”

In essence, you might notice your critical mind chattering away at you, but it will no longer take up central importance it once did and leave you free to choose what direction to take in your life.

Simple Steps to Stop Negative Thoughts

While some may need to seek help from professionals, Coyne said there are “simple steps that folks might practice, helping them detach from that critical voice and build more joy and vitality and connection in their lives.”

1. Pause a Moment

If you are feeling stressed, anxious, or stuck in negative thinking patterns, PAUSE. Focus your awareness on the world around you with your five senses.

2. Notice the Difference

NOTICE the difference between being stuck in your thoughts vs. experiencing the present moment through your five senses. Notice also what you have been up to in your mind. Were you arguing with yourself? Struggling with disproving negative or critical self-evaluations? Trying to push unpleasant thoughts or images out of your head? Ask yourself whether this mental struggle is serving you well.

3. Label Your Thoughts

If it isn’t, see if you can step back and LABEL your thoughts as they are, rather than literal truths. For example, you might practice slowing down your thoughts and adding to them the stem “I am having the thought that ….” Continue this practice of labeling, without attempting to soften, change, or avoid whatever thoughts you happen to be having. See if you can notice what it is like to have some distance between you—the thinker—and your thoughts.

4. Choose Your Intention

Once you have PAUSED from your mental struggle, NOTICED what’s happening and how it’s been working, and LABELED your thoughts for what they are—simple, mental weather that will come and go—you are better able to CHOOSE your intention, and the next right step for you. Are you going to continue to struggle with your thoughts? Or you can choose to take a small step toward something that matters to you in your life.