

THOULOSTGHT*



Some people contend that worry shows how seriously we take an issue, and that anger is motivating. But both actually divert attention and energy from the business at hand.

What did that headline say? Were you able to read it? The rules of the English language dictate that we must read and write from left to right. But if we stick with that rule, the headline doesn't make sense. We are lost -- lost in the thought that there is only one way to read.

Figuring out the headline is a game. But the consequences of getting lost in thought are all too serious.

Consider, for example, those nights when something awakens you, a barking dog, a car starting, a siren, even a cool breeze. Sometimes you roll over and go right back to sleep. At other times, a problem comes to mind; one thought follows another as you toss and turn. You spend the rest of the night worrying.

"I have to worry," a friend said recently. She's a senior executive in a company that had just completed its second round of layoffs as it rides through these tough economic times. She can't shirk her responsibilities, can't just shrug her shoulders and wait for some sort of miracle. Important decisions have to be made, and she is one of the people who have to make them. And so, she says, she has to worry.

How much we worry seems to show how seriously we take an issue, how much we care about it, how much energy we're willing to invest to find a solution.

But do we really have to worry? What is worry, anyway?

Worry is a thought, or a set of thoughts. We start with an issue or problem. Because we don't know exactly what will happen or what to do, we're operating in the unknown. That means that we're a little unsure, perhaps even fearful. And because our minds are innately fertile, we start thinking about all the things that could happen, all the consequences that could play out. In our imaginations, the seed of concern grows bigger and bigger. That's worry: imagination fertilizing insecurity until we raise a tangled thicket of thorny thoughts.

Can a worrier be saved?

Anneke was one of those dedicated workers who worried a lot. Night after night, she would stay late at her desk, wrestling with complex assignments. When her boss would urge Anneke to leave early, say, 6:30 p.m., she would shrug him off. She would drag herself home at 10:30 p.m., then be back at the computer, red-eyed and

shoulders sagging, first thing the next morning. Yes, she was dedicated. Look how hard she was trying! Anneke could see no other choice. She couldn't see that she was worrying herself to the point of diminishing returns, that juncture where increased effort returns less and less benefit. What Anneke's boss was trying to point her to was the way to break the worry cycle: table the subject; engage in something else until you can return with a fresh perspective.

Another friend of ours is a recovering worrier. What saved him? "Just knowing that worry is a thought," he says.

As simple as that sounds, it isn't always easy. We are so used to the chatter in our heads that we forget that what looks like immutable facts are just thoughts, and we are the ones generating those thoughts. To break the worry habit, we need to pay more attention to thinking that drains our energy. Here are five telltale signs of worry:

- Is your mind running in a loop? Addressing a problem, you find yourself going over and over the same data. No matter how hard you try, no new ideas come forward.
- Are your thoughts coming faster and faster?
- Does it seem that you don't even have time to catch a breath?
- What's the feeling under your thinking? Is fear or insecurity present? Are you getting fatigued from "chewing your cud" over and over and over?
- How absolutely certain are you that you must look at the issue in the way that you are doing? That no other possibilities exist?

If you notice these signs in yourself, don't worry about worrying! You can use these as clues to foster a more sustainable way of problem-solving and decision-making.

Model yourself not on the marathon runner, who punishes her legs as she pounds out the miles, pushing through "the wall" of physical and mental fatigue, nonstop to the finish line. Instead, engage in a relay race. Pick up the baton, the issue, and run with it until you encounter any of the telltales of worry. Then, pass the baton, to another team member, or to your own mental backburner. This does not mean you are in denial, or that you are irresponsible; you are simply choosing to use your resources productively. Engage in another activity, or rest. When your thinking is flowing freely, pick up the baton again and take it another lap. Repeat the process until, Eureka! the solution becomes apparent.

"I have to be angry"

Like worry, anger is nonproductive, a drain on our mental resources. Yet, as with worry, there are people who say, "I have to be angry." There really are criminals; bad things really do happen. If I'm not angry, will I seem to condone the crime? Will I be taken for a doormat, allowing aggressors to walk all over me? Will I forget the past, and therefore be condemned to repeat it?

"Anger gives me the energy to fight back," says one of our clients. "America had to get angry after 9/11 so that we could do the job in Afghanistan." Was that anger really

necessary? Were the bombs more effective because the flight crews who dropped them were angry?

Beyond that: is anger even helpful? We experience anger as a strong emotion; but, like worry, anger is actually triggered by a thought or set of thoughts. Angry thoughts are compelling. They consume our attention, blinding us to many choices and possibilities. They can cause an adrenaline rush that creates the illusion that anger generates energy; in reality, it makes it harder to tap our deepest resources: wisdom, intuition, common sense. Seeing anger as "just a thought" in the very heat of the moment begins to lower one's mental temperature, just as opening the window cools the interior of a car that has been in the hot sun all day.

"Outgrow the hatred and conflict of the past"

Consider Nelson Mandela, a man who had a lot of reason to be angry. Seeing the suffering caused by racist suppression, for more than half a century Mandela was a leader in the movement against apartheid, the government policy by which South Africa's white minority persecuted the black majority. By 1961, when he was sent to prison, Mandela had concluded that armed struggle was inevitable as "a defense against the violence of apartheid." More than 20 years later, he rejected an offer of release if he would renounce violence. Mandela's drive to end apartheid did not succeed because of his anger, but, as pundits have noted, because of his patience, wisdom, vision, and integrity. At long last released in February 1990, on Christmas Eve of that year, Mandela addressed his nation: "We must strive to be moved by a generosity of spirit that will enable us to outgrow the hatred and conflict of the past." That "generosity of spirit" is, simply put, forgiveness.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that we condone harmful behaviors or bad decisions. It doesn't mean that we will forget, or that we won't hold accountable the perpetrators of misdeeds. It doesn't mean that we won't act vigorously to take care of others, and ourselves and to make things right. But we can do what needs to be done far more effectively if we are thinking clearly than if we are angry, as the saying goes, "in a blind rage."

By not forgiving, by holding on to hurt, resentment, anger against others (or against ourselves, for who among us has not made mistakes?) we bind ourselves to negativity, to thoughts that sap energy. As psychologist Dr. George Pransky has said, it's as if we are holding onto a sharp-edged stone, gripping it tighter and tighter. The stone is unaffected by the anger with which we clutch it. It is our palms that begin to bleed.

We have another choice: we can notice that the stone is sharp, notice its edges, and then drop it. Forgiveness allows us to put the past in its place; it frees us to use all of our mental energy to move on to something better. Reflect for a moment. What has worry or anger ever really done for you? What positive outcomes have you accomplished when you were worried or angry? Are you satisfied with the return on the time and energy you have invested in such thoughts?

The source for worry and anger is the same: our thinking. Their cost is the same: diversion of attention and energy from what we really want. And so is the antidote: seeing our thinking more clearly.

* ThoLOSTught = "lost in thought"

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