



The Difference Between Thoughts and Feelings

One of the tools available in module three is the “coaching model.” The coaching model is a tool derived from cognitive behavioral research and is used to help understand our thought patterns and how we can shift them to attain a goal. Below is a primer on the coaching model.

The model states that all aspects of our lives are categorized into five elements: circumstances, thoughts, feelings, actions, and results. Most of what we experience in this world can be categorized and understood within this framework.

Once we see how things are categorized, we can begin to understand how our interaction with each layer determines the results in our lives. How we think about things determines how we feel about things. How we feel about things determines what we do or don’t do—our actions or inactions. And, of course, our actions (or lack thereof) create our results. The sum of these results then creates our lives. It is often summed up as: “Change your thoughts, change your life.”

Here is how the five categories are defined:

Circumstances

Things that happen in the world that we cannot control - this includes our past. Circumstances are also facts. They are facts that everyone would agree upon at any given time. “This is a rock.” “This is a chair.” “It is raining.” “I weigh 150 pounds.” These are never subjective.

Thoughts

Thoughts are just sentences that happen in your mind. Thoughts are our interpretation of facts or circumstances. Your brain creates them. They are what gives meaning to our circumstances. We have hundreds of thoughts throughout the day, even about one particular circumstance. “This rock is heavy.” “This chair

is comfortable.” “The rain is ruining my day.” “I need to lose weight.” “I need to gain weight.” Thoughts can vary about a single fact, even for an individual person. Our thoughts are where we can have a lot of impact.

Feelings

Feelings are the emotions that we experience, caused by the thoughts we are thinking. Another way to think about feelings is that they are sensations that we experience in our bodies (aka your blood boiling when you are angry, your stomach clenching, your heart pounding when scared.) Feelings are always created by a thought we are thinking. “I’m so happy it’s raining because my flower garden needs it.” “I’m so proud that I’m 150 pounds, my resistance training is paying off!”

Actions

Actions are our behaviors, reactions, or inaction. This is what we do, or don’t do, in the world. Actions are directly motivated by our feelings. I keep exercising because I’m proud of my results. I quit exercising because I’m frustrated. Actions also include inaction—such as avoiding certain people or things. They can be subtle, like a change in our tone of voice. They also include ruminating or catastrophizing with certain thoughts (actions in our heads).

Results

Results are what we see in the world and our lives as an effect of our actions or inactions. ‘I now weigh 155 pounds.’ The result will always be evidence of the original thought.

The work of differentiating our circumstances, thoughts, and feelings can be particularly challenging because often they get jumbled into one category but separating them can be incredibly helpful.

For this series, we will use the words “circumstance” and “fact” interchangeably. Likewise, we will use the words “story”, “thoughts”, and “truths” interchangeably. This can be a little confusing at first because truths and facts are often used interchangeably in our common vernacular, but for this work, they are not the same thing.

For example, it may be true to many of us that medical school is challenging. However, there are some people out there who don't find medical school challenging. Subjectivity makes it a thought and not a circumstance. Some people might also carry the thought that medical school is not challenging. A circumstance of medical school might be “it is a 4-year curriculum.” Even statements like “medical school is expensive” are not facts; they are subjective. The fact might be that medical school tuition at X school is \$66,000 per year. That is a fact (or circumstance) that everyone can agree on and prove. From that circumstance, we can create lots of thoughts like, “Medical school is expensive”, “medical school is an investment”, etc.

When we can differentiate between our circumstances, and our thoughts about our circumstances, we can have a lot of power. We often believe that our circumstances are the source of our problems, and if that is true, we must change them to solve them. Of course, there are many situations in which we cannot change the circumstances. When we differentiate between our circumstances, which are neutral, from our thoughts which are subjective and not neutral, we can identify the effect our thoughts are having. It is our thoughts that cause our feelings, which in turn fuel the actions we take or don't take.

If we can separate our circumstances, thoughts, and feelings, we can create a lot of change in the way we move through a process.

This might seem like a lot to take in, and that is normal. What we want you to focus on is getting very clear on what feelings you are having, and the thoughts that might be the cause of those feelings. As you build this ability in yourself, the rest of it becomes easier to understand and move forward with.

Try these exercises:

1. Become aware of your feelings such as anger, happiness, or annoyance, even in low-stakes situations like having dinner with your family.
2. Pay attention to the thoughts you are having and try to notice [or identify or name] what feelings are being caused by those thoughts.

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