



## Understand and Manage Your Attitudes

### CONTENTS

Attitudinal Agriculture	2
Mental Floss	2
Developing Metacognition	3
What (and How) Do You Think?	4
Techniques for Paying Attention	5
Tracking Our Thoughts and Beliefs	6
Further Support and Resources	6

*The mind is its own place and in itself can make a hell of heaven or a heaven of hell."*

[John Milton, Paradise Lost]

## Attitudinal Agriculture

*"Consciousness can be shown to be a constructed reality . . . What is experienced as reality is actually only a representation [and] . . . consciousness may be altered simply by changing the manner of its construction."*

[Robert Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness*]

How much does it matter what we think from moment to moment? Or how we think? The answer to both questions, according to an increasingly large and persuasive body of research and writing is more than you might have thought.

Whatever you are doing right now, whatever you feel, whatever your perspective of the day's events and whatever you want or will do next - are matters determined by the nature and quality of your thinking and thought systems. We constantly cultivate our thinking and harvest the resulting attitudes.

But it seems that relatively few people realise the powerful role their thought processes play in their lives, and fewer gain significant command of them. Mostly, they're unaware that what they think and how they reason are continual sources of problems that direct energy away from where it is most needed and direct it instead to fruitless efforts. They can't monitor their thinking and don't modify poor thinking.

If your thinking is unrealistic, it will lead you to disappointments. If improvisational rather than methodical, you may act randomly and others will experience you as *all over the place*. If overly pessimistic, you will often be anxious and overlook things in which you could take pleasure. If it is predominantly reactive or mindless rather than responsive and mindful, you will reinforce unhelpful patterning and ensure you continue to get more of what you've always got.

When your thinking follows sound logic, constructive processes, mature and psychologically healthy beliefs, you are likely to more often do whatever is right for you, enjoy the moment, readily access your creativity, remain calm and objective amidst turmoil, discover new personal strengths, trust in your own resources and passion, regard yourself with greater positive regard, discover generic principles of change and guidelines for future action.

By better understanding our thinking and thought processes we can learn to alter our attitudes, feelings and desires. This can lead to increased emotional intelligence, decreased stress, and a better ability to serve and influence others with integrity: we can make better decisions, solve problems more efficiently, plan and act more constructively, reduce friction in relationships and get better results from groups and teams.

## Mental Floss

When we first learn to pay attention to the activity of our own mind, it is common to discover and to be surprised by two things:

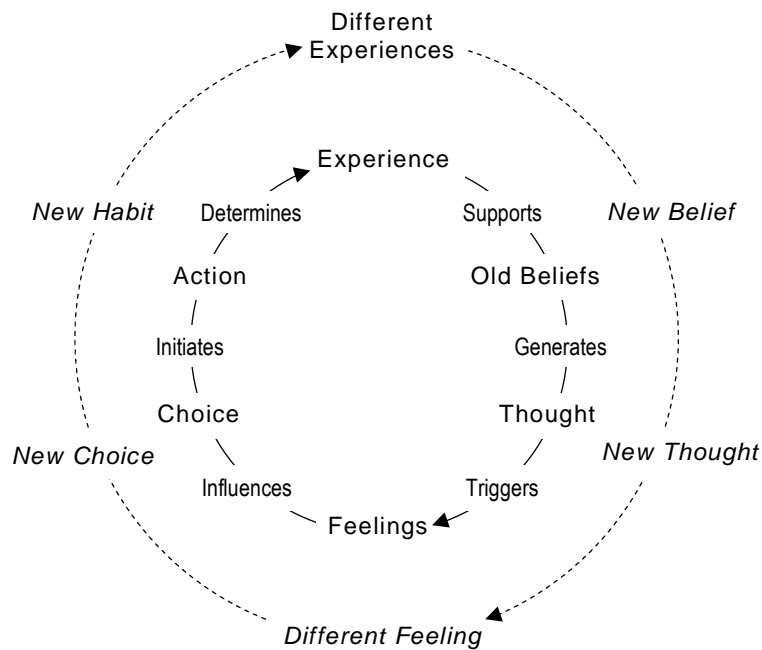
- We constantly generate good/bad judgements about and to define our experiences and expectations of future experiences. These tend to dominate our minds and lock us into unconscious mechanical reactions. Many are particularly unhelpful. Some have no objective basis at all.
- Many of our thought processes do not resemble critical thinking or healthy habits of mind; they are ill-considered, unhelpfully and repetitively reactive, disorganised and improvisational.

This, of course, is true for everyone. The development of our personal thought systems can be traced back through many generations of our family. From what they passed on or from our reactions to what they attempted to pass on, we came to accept a certain series of conclusions about life, others and ourselves. We learned to see whatever we were taught to look for, to notice what we were taught to notice, to make the judgements others made about what we notice, and to have the aversions or desires we do. Our attitudes about life can be summarised as a series of thoughts we came to believe as truth.

There's no doubt that much of that usually serves us very well. Some aspects, however, may not serve our best interests and it is possible to change them, once we know what they are.

There is nothing holding our attitudes in place other than our willingness to retain them. They are not based on absolute truth; they are perceptions based on our individual versions of life. They are not in our genes; if they were, they would be identical to those of others in our family. They are not due to our current circumstances; if they were, positive attitudes would be tied to positive circumstances and negative attitudes to difficult circumstances. We all know this isn't universally the case; many people seem to thrive on challenge and some in very difficult circumstances are happy simply to be alive. Hardships that others endure do not always cause us adversity.

The key difference is personal attitude arising from individual thought. Each of us is predisposed to a certain way of thinking that derives from past experience and patterning:



### Developing Metacognition

Once we see how little there is holding our predisposition to certain attitudes in place we can begin to notice, monitor and where necessary challenge our own thoughts. Although it takes strength and wisdom to distrust habitual thinking, the good news is that when we stop using our ability to think against ourselves or to decide that there are only habitual ways of doing or regarding things, we are left with healthy psychological functioning – our most natural state of mind.

All we have to do is pay more attention to our thinking and avoid the mental processes that interfere with healthy, constructive functioning. The process is called *metacognition*: monitoring, thinking about and modifying our thinking processes them as we use them.

Metacognition is an essential aspect of critical thinking and one indicator of *emotional intelligence*. The more we engage in metacognition, the better is our ability to identify and strengthen those aspects of our thinking that serve us well, and to find and modify those that do not.

There is a great deal of power and potential in this. We can become more mature thinkers and experience less anxiety, guilt, stress, displeasure and resentment than we currently do. We can control our attitudes towards any or all of what happens to us, including challenge and adversity. We can undo whatever unnecessarily complex, harshly judgemental, pointless, problematic habits of thoughts and process we learned, and become clearer, more strategic, more critical thinkers. By doing so we may change our lives.

Further good news is that unlike our desires or feelings, we can have direct access to our thinking.

The mind is composed of three functions: thinking, feeling, and desiring or wanting. Wherever one of these functions is present, the other two are also present. These three functions are continually influencing and being influenced by one another. We do not change feelings by substituting other feelings, or desires by substituting other desires. It is only our thinking that we have direct access to. We can discover our thoughts and consider new ways to think. We can experiment with new thinking and change our patterns and habits of thought. And when our thinking changes, our feelings, desires and behaviours shift in accordance with the change.

Metacognition infers active control over the process of thinking and the cultivation of useful habits of mind. These may be applicable to new learning, change strategies, goal achievement, interpersonal relationship challenges, planning and problem-solving processes, selecting “the right tool for the right job”, monitoring personal comprehension, maintaining motivation and perspective, and action-reflection practices with which to distill wisdom and learning from experience.

People who are adept at metacognition tend to develop more than other people do, general, generic and context-independent skills likely to be useful in a wide range of different situations; they consequently become less anxious in challenging situations, knowing that they can rely on a tool-kit of pre-developed “*what to do when I don't know what to do*” processes and competencies.

### What (and How) Do You Think?

*To his housekeeper's inquiry, “Would you like a cup of tea Monsieur?” French philosopher Rene Descartes replied, “I think not” and vanished forever. We don't know he ever became aware of this remarkable validation of his hypothesis, “I think therefore I am.”*

We constantly cultivate our thinking and harvest the resulting attitudes but much or all of it may not be consciously registered. It is common for people's lives to be based moment to moment on subconscious thinking and thought processes never explicitly put into words. Those who think negatively usually do not say of themselves, “*I am choosing to think about myself and my experience in largely negative terms. I prefer to be as unhappy as possible.*”

Those who are nervous rarely recognise that they are projecting past experiences on the future (bypassing the present) and immobilising themselves with anxiety. For example, someone who withholds from giving honest feedback to others through anxiety may not usually register the most common thinking behind this decision: “*I choose to exaggerate the possible consequences and deny the probable benefits of my doing this to the point where I become immobilised through fear.*”

Those who choose to avoid confronting people of whom they may say, “*They ought to know better and it's not my job to tell them*”, usually don't explore their own willingness to deny their authenticity, responsibility for their lives and potential strength – or to see themselves as powerless victims of others' actions.

People who are persistently frustrated, irritable or angry rarely attribute this to the prime cause: their holding in their minds an idea of perfection against which they constantly judge themselves, other individuals, or society as failures.

Very many current authors address these topics, and as a “generation” we may be the first to understand the potential it offers. Nonetheless, I am surprised by how few people incorporate critical thinking or attitudinal change within their targets for personal or professional development. For over 15 years, participants in my *Managing Effective Relationships* and *Hear and Be Heard* interpersonal skills training programmes have discovered how powerful it is to understand that “*Although I **may** eventually be able, to change my mind by changing my behaviour, I **can** change my mind and a behavioural change readily follows.*”

## Techniques for Paying Attention

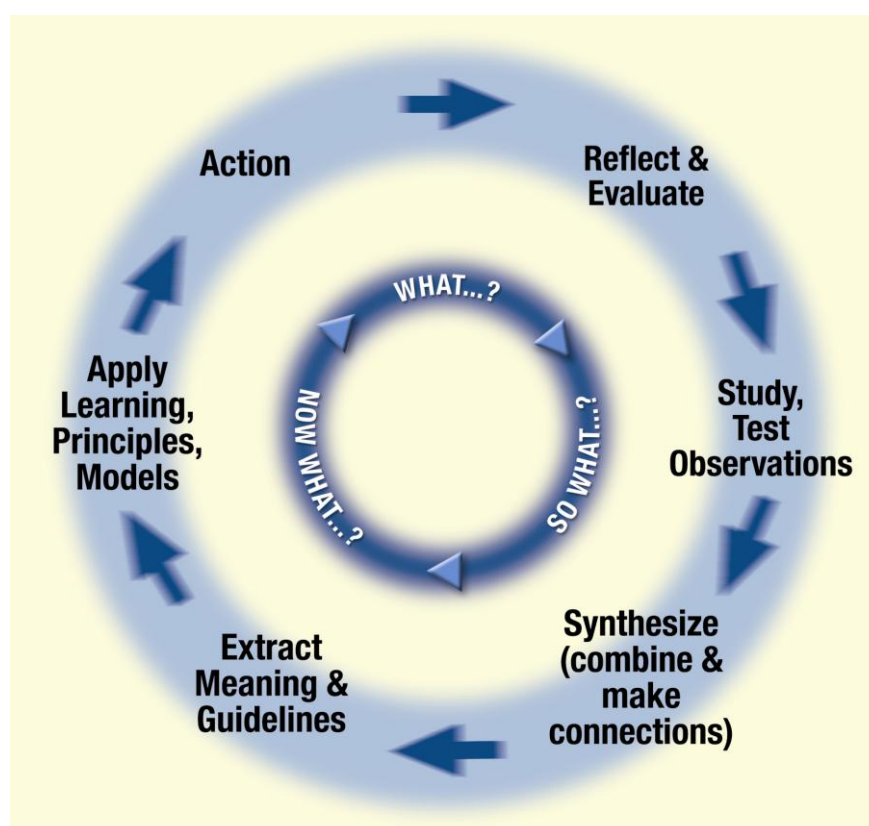
A good deal of my work as a coach and mentor supports clients to become more critical thinkers and more self-aware self-managers. This usually involves learning (i) to study the connections between personal attitudes, thought processes, feelings, choices and action; and (ii) to practise becoming less improvisational and more consistently methodical.

The first step is to learn to **pay attention** to our practices and our thinking. This raises awareness of them and with raised awareness and careful observation we can eventually find the origins, structures, processes and logical composition of our thoughts and thought processes or patterns. These straightforward practices can do a good deal to strengthen the ability to pay attention:

You can practise this by learning to separate “task” from “process” or “means”; topic or agenda, from method. Ask of your plans, decisions, meetings, projects and problems, *How am I approaching this? How am I behaving? What processes am I applying? How am I feeling about what I’m engaged in? How is my body, breathing, heart rate, temperature responding to these circumstances? What’s going on with me? What thinking (of mine) has led to these things?*

Practice some form of meditation designed to slow down or halt your thinking and help you notice what your mind is doing.

Find ways of inserting more pauses into your day, week or month by, for instance, refusing to involve yourself in days of wall-to-wall meetings. Schedule regular coaching, mentoring or professional supervision sessions. Schedule a weekly “reflection time” for yourself, in which you process the week using the process suggested in the following graphic. Find micro-pauses in the course of an hour, a morning or a day, in which you catch your breath, notice your breathing and thinking, and ask yourself *What? So what? Now what?*:



Use our Self-Assessment and Self-Review worksheets (accessible in our Subscriber Library) to support and enhance these processes.

One of the methods I use to work on my attention skills is a beeping watch with a countdown timer. I'll set the watch to go off every 47 minutes. When I hear it beeping I try to notice where my attention is. Am I in the present moment? Or am I daydreaming and thinking about a mistake made in the past or worried about something that hasn't actually happened yet? Am I focused on the world around me or caught up in my feelings? Am I aware of how other people and objects are supporting my life and work, or thinking about why my life is so hard and wondering why people aren't meeting my expectations? In Japanese Psychology we have a maxim, *Your experience of life isn't based on your life, it's based on what you pay attention to.*"

[Greg Krech, [www.todoinstitute.org](http://www.todoinstitute.org)]

To a novice these suggestions may sound difficult (and most beginners do find them challenging, initially) but they soon produce results, especially if skilled support is available.

### Tracking our Thoughts and Beliefs

My clients, for example, soon establish in relation to handling conflict and differences that a fundamental and often-present reference-point is one or more of these beliefs: *Conflict is dangerous, destructive and leads to unhappy outcomes. I cannot deal with it. It's important to pretend it's not happening, or sweep it under the carpet. Other's criticism, manipulation or bullying of me is not fair; it shouldn't happen. I should remain a powerless victim of other people's decisions. Conflict is dangerous, destructive and leads to unhappy outcomes unless I do it to them before they can do it to me; it's important to maintain control over others and gain the upper hand.* When those **are** the reference points for a current or prospective conflict, people quickly become anxious, worried or fearful because of thoughts such as these:

- *This has been dreadful in the past. I can guarantee it will be this time, too.*
- *It's going to be too painful. I'd better avoid it or deny its reality.*
- *I'd better make sure I defend myself well, by attacking first or retaliating in kind.*
- *Winning is more important than the agenda or the relationship.*
- *Why bother? I may as well give up now, before things get worse.*

Many leaders I've worked with consistently give themselves a hard time, increasing their stress and anxiety over their roles by operating from belief systems that include, *Perfection, though impossible, is necessary; I must not, cannot, fail; I am completely responsible for all of this and there is never a time when I can say I've done enough and all that I can for now. I must not show signs of weakness or vulnerability. It would be a sign of failure to ask for help.* Madness comes these beliefs and thoughts, or at least burnout.<sup>1</sup>

The natural consequences of such thoughts are emotions and behaviours which serve to reinforce the original belief or set of beliefs. They are self-fulfilling prophecies, closed loops.

### Further Support and Resources

With practice, it is entirely possible to train ourselves to habituate new beliefs, thoughts and behaviours. Study what others have researched and written about these topics. Contact me at EncourageMentors ([www.encouragemententors.com](http://www.encouragemententors.com)) if you'd like my 1:1 support in person or online.

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<sup>1</sup> In none of the cases I have in mind, has a leader been able to identify beliefs such as these without considerable support to do so; that is to say they were hitherto unaware of them and their effects. That's normal.

## Resources

In relation to interpersonal communication and relationship management practices, (including managing differences, conflict resolution and problem-solving processes), I recommend my own work in *Hear and Be Heard* (the workbook and guidebook<sup>2</sup>) for its focus on discovering and altering the attitudinal bases of the interpersonal behaviours we use for relating to others.

Many the articles in the Thriving Workplace library are concerned with helping people become more methodical in their thinking about leading, planning and managing intentions and relationships with others. Where should you begin? Where can you most easily begin? Wherever that is, start small to increase the odds of sustaining change and if it involves other people, to avoid alarming them.

Here are some further useful references:

- *Stumbling on Happiness*, Daniel Gilbert, (Vintage Books, 2007).
- *Loving What Is*, Byron Katie (Three Rivers Press, 2002)
- *The Executive Brain*, Elkhonon Goldberg (Oxford University Press, 2001)
- *The Female Brain*, Louann Brizendine (Morgan Road Books, 2006)
- *Critical Thinking*, Richard Paul and Linda Elder, (Prentice Hall, 2001)
- *The Owner's Manual for the Brain*, Pierce J Howard, (Bard Press, 1994)
- *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman, (Bloomsbury, 1996)
- *Destructive Emotions And How We Can Overcome Them*, The Dalai Lama and Daniel Goleman, (Bantam Books 2003)
- *Stop Thinking, Start Living*, Richard Carlson, (Harper Collins, 1993)
- *Change You Mind, Change Your Life (Concepts in Attitudinal Healing)*, Gerald Jampolsky and Diane Cirincione, (Bantam Books, 1993)
- *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, Jon Kabat-Zinn, (Delta, 1991).
- *Your Owner's Manual*, Burt Hotchkiss (www.proaxis.com; nonnie@proaxis.com)

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### Avoiding Invisible Chairs

When I was a Boy Scout, we played a game when new scouts joined the troop. We lined up chairs in a pattern, creating an obstacle course through which the new scouts, blindfolded, were supposed to manoeuvre. The scoutmaster gave them a few moments to study the pattern before our adventure began. But as soon as the victims were blindfolded, the rest of us quietly removed the chairs.

I think life is like this game . . . we spend our lives avoiding obstacles we have created for ourselves but in reality exist only in our minds . . . Don't avoid any chairs until you run smack into one.

[Pierce Vincent Eckhart]

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<sup>2</sup> *Hear and Be Heard* is a comprehensive treatment of interpersonal practices for confident communication and constructive relationships; a map of the territory and practical guide to managing interpersonal effectiveness.