



a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap

Episode 9: How to Change Your Thinking

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford, and I'm an academic life coach and a professor in Los Angeles.

Dinur: And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles.

Adam: And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where discuss how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 9, "How to Change Your Thinking."

Emerson said that the greatest discovery of his generation was that by changing your attitude, or how you think, you can change your circumstances. Since attitude, or how we think, is one of the few things we can control, this makes sense, but how do you change your attitude? In this episode, Adam and I will talk about some ways you can shift your thinking, so that you can change your circumstances.

A lot of the problems that we have as students, and as teachers, can be traced back to how we think about a situation, a problem, an assignment or a person. Here are a few basic ways that we can work on changing our thinking.

Adam: Life coaches like Brooke Castillo, Byron Katie, and many others have talked about the connection between how we think and how we feel. And the basic idea is that there are things that we cannot control, which is almost everything, and then we think about them, or maybe we obsess about them, and we assign meaning to them. And those thoughts are the meaning we assign to the situation, then feelings. And so the goal in most of this is to question our thought, see if it's true, and proceed from there.

So, as an example, you might be looking at an exam. And you can't change the fact that there's an exam. You have to take the exam. But the way you think about the exam creates the feelings you have about the exam, so if you're thinking "this is going to be really hard; I'm not going to be able to do this; I've studied hard and I still don't feel like I'm going to be able to do this;" then the feelings you're creating are going to be things like anxiety and tension, maybe even fear.

And if you go into the exam with those feelings, it's going to change the way you act - what you're able to do - and that's going to change your results. And this is straight from Castillo's Life Coach School. We're going to demonstrate it, more than talk about it. Dinur has agreed to role-play a student, and I'm going to play a coach, basically walking him through these different tools. And so we want to give you an idea of how they work by watching how they're done. So basically, we're giving you an example of how this is done.

So Dinur, give us the background of the student that you're going to be role-playing, because it's you.

Dinur: This comes out of my own life. This was me taking the qualifying exams to be able to advance

beyond a master's and towards the PhD. And these exams are giant take-home exams; all essays. We had to write three papers between ten to fifteen pages each, in a span of seventy-two hours. So it's a fairly lengthy paper, after a fairly lengthy paper, after a fairly lengthy paper, in rapid succession.

Adam: Let's put this here: the exam that he's taking, this qualifying exam, is a circumstance. That's what Castillo's label is for it. It's a thing you can't control; it's just a fact. It's there: you gotta take this exam.

So what were you thinking about this exam as you were getting ready for it?

Dinur: Oh, I definitely was nervous when I was preparing. To give you an idea of how massive these tests are, people would submit reading lists that were about 15 to 20 pages long, and that was just to prepare for this exam. Well, I remember going through that list and going, "there is no way in hell I'm ever going to know everything there is to know here; there is no way. Maybe I'm just not cut out to do this. This isn't going to happen."

Adam: So we've got the thoughts of there's "no way I can do this, maybe I'm not cut out for this, maybe I'm really not good enough for this," basically. And then you said that this created quite a bit of anxiety, so you go from the thought "there is no way I can do this and then that produces a feeling. What was the feeling that it was producing?"

Dinur: A lot of unease, a lot of anxiety, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of self-doubt.

Adam: So these thoughts that you're having - and this is sort of the central thing for this, how to change your thinking - thoughts are not factual, because thoughts have value judgments. They have adjectives, like when you say "there's no way in hell I'm going to be able to do this," another way to say that is "I'm incompetent. I'm not good at this." These are all value judgments. All right?

The basic thought is, "I have to take this exam." Notice there's no value judgments there, there's no feelings injected into it with adjectives like "terrifying." The thing that's first important to do is to identify: are you actually identifying what's going on, or are you projecting meaning onto it? Are you projecting a thought, a value judgment?

Some thoughts may not be about a specific thing like the exam. They may be more about whether you are a good student, or whether you are worthy of getting a good grade, or it's a bunch of things that are more about the identity. And so, here are some other questions to ask yourself when these judgments of the self, rather than your judgments of your abilities come up, because the first example we gave was mostly about the ability of passing an exam.

But what if it's about a judgment of yourself, like "I am a loser," or "I'm a crummy student," or "I'm a failure"? So then there are some other questions to ask. And these come from Brené Brown and from elle luna, and we will put links to their books and to Byron Katie's book and to Castillo's podcasts in the show notes, because they're really important, and we're just giving an overview here.

So if the thought is something like, "I'm a loser." Or let's even go better: "I'm a failure." All right? The first thing to ask yourself is: is this your own thought, or did you get it from someone else? This is from Brené Brown, you know: is this your thought or does it belong to somebody else? And they gave it to you - and I'll tell you right now, as sociologists, none of your thoughts are original.

Dinur: Yes.

Adam: OK? All your thoughts came from someone else, when you were socialized. So if there was someone in your past, or even in your current situation, who keeps telling you you're a failure, that thought didn't come from you. So when you identify who that person is, then the next thing you need to

ask yourself is: is that person on your side or not? are they cheering for you to succeed or are they trying to keep you from succeeding?

And I'll use an example. I've talked before about my difficulties with math, I had a second grade and fourth grade teacher who took offense at the fact that I was a gifted kid who couldn't do math.

She constantly told me how I wasn't trying, how I was lazy, how I was a failure, how I was a disappointment. Oh, and she would call my mother and get my mother worked up about this, so I got it from my mom too. And what I realized is, that that thought "I'm stupid at math," is not my thought, it's a Mrs. Stevenson thought. And I don't need to keep that thought, because she was definitely not on my side. So if she's not on my side, is there any good reason to keep thinking this thought? And the answer is "no, absolutely not."

And so, I have mostly let go of that thought... Yes, it's still pops up every now and then, but then I just say "oh, hi, Mrs. Stevenson! I'm not interested in your opinion! Bye!" ... because she had no vested interest in my success.

Dinur: This also shows us the power of labels, and how they can really shape how people think about themselves, and that's something that as teachers we need to be very, very aware of.

Adam: Right, because if we start putting labels on our students, they're going to adopt that label, and they're going to identify with that label. And if the label is telling them "unless you do perfectly on all the exams, then you are a failure" - that's not a label they want. That's not a label we should be putting on them.

The thoughts that a lot of people have when they're facing something they can't control is "I shouldn't have to do this" or "it should be this way" or "it's not fair" or "it ought to be something different." So any time you catch yourself saying those things, that is your mind fighting with reality, according to Byron Katie.

Byron Katie has an interesting story, she was very depressed, she had a horrible time. She actually entered an eating disorder clinic because that was the only clinic that had in-patient care. And she essentially had a nervous breakdown.

But one of the things she realized while she was in care - and she realized this on her own - is that the thing that was stressing her out was all the "shoulds." When she recognized that she could say, "my kids should do this," but they weren't doing it, what she needed to do was recognize that they're not doing it. The reality is, they're not doing it. So I need to deal with the fact that they're not doing it, not say "hey should do it, I should do this, so it should be that, I should have the other," and in the same way, "I shouldn't have to do that, I shouldn't want that, I shouldn't need that, they shouldn't expect that of me."

And for some people - I mean, I also took qualifying exams and I remember feeling very offended that I had to do these. It's like, "I shouldn't have to do this. "I've already done a ton of work, and they should just look at what I've already done. Why should I have to go through this hazing process?" So there is that, but if it's reality, then saying "it shouldn't" or "it should" is just your mind fighting with it.

Brooke Castillo then talks about how to tell the difference between something that is a fact and something that is a thought. So, I'll use myself as an example here then: I'm afraid of dogs, because I was bitten in the face by a dog when I was about four years old. So I've never really gotten to the point where I could be totally feeling safe around dogs. I mean, I can be around dogs, but if they're jumpy or if they're yappy, that's my applying meaning to "dog." The fact is there is a dog. There are not "there is a violent dangerous dog there." That "violent dangerous" stuff? That's my own brain putting meaning on the existence of a dog near me.

So in the same way, “this is an awful test, this is a scary test, this is a horrible test.” OK, those are all your thoughts about the test. “There is a qualifying exam. I have to take a qualifying exam.” That's just a fact. But “I have to take this qualifying exam that is horrifying and terrifying and I'm going to lose sleep and I'm not going to be able to cope” - and you've just put a bunch of meanings on it, right? So then Byron Katie asks about putting that thought on it, “I'm not going to be able to do this!”

This is where we get to your friends. So, do you have evidence that that thing is true?

Dinur: Right. I'm not the only person to take this exam. Others have passed it before me. So my thinking became: “well, if they can pass it, why couldn't I or why can't I?” Because some of these are friends, and I view myself as their peer, as their equal. (I'm sure a few of them are laughing at that.) But I also realize look, this means that passing these tests is doable, because the people I hang out with and that I talk to, that we talk about life, that we talk about fun stuff and that we talk about academic stuff - they can pass this. That means that I probably can as well.

Adam: So you have friends who have taken it, you had friends who were taking it, they were all surviving it, they were all passing, and so your evidence is: no, I don't have evidence. I have feelings, I'm anxious, I'm worried - but do you actually have evidence that you can't pass this exam?

Dinur: Nope.

Adam: And so once you realize that there is no evidence - and feelings are never evidence because feelings are not factual - so, once you realize “there's no actual evidence for this, most people who take this thing pass it, and I know that I'm at least as good as my peers, so I will probably pass it” - so, you don't have any evidence for the thought. Well, then she asks; Are there good reasons to stop thinking this?

Dinur: And there absolutely were.

Adam: And what are those reasons?

Dinur: There's nothing to back them up. If we would ding our students for writing something and they can give us supporting evidence, then we need to be able to do the same with our thoughts and our feelings. If there is no evidence to back this feeling up, then we have to be able to say, “OK, we're going to put this aside, we're not focusing on this.”

Adam: Right, and then she asks - because there may be good reasons to stop thinking it - can you think of any good reason that isn't stressful to keep thinking it? Is there any good, stress-free reason to keep thinking “I'm not going to pass this exam?”

Dinur: And to me there wasn't. That thought wasn't doing me much good, because while I would read and try and prepare, if my focus was on the anxiety then it meant that whatever notes I was taking, whatever I was reading weren't going to be very productive. If I could learn to focus and just put some emphasis on the material, and not worry about the “am I going to pass or fail,” as counterintuitive as it was, that ended up being more effective. Because now, more of my attention and my energy were focused into something that I actually needed to do for this.

Adam: And you've actually described the answer to the last question that Byron Katie asks, which is, all right, so is the thought factual? No.

OK, so are there good reasons to stop thinking it? Yes.

Are there any good stress-free reasons to keep thinking it? No.

And then you just answered the next question, which is, “what would it be like if you couldn't think that thought?” You couldn't think “I'm going to fail this exam.”

What would it be like? Wouldn't you be more confident about the exam? Wouldn't you feel less stressed about the exams?

Dinur: I felt more free.

Adam: And does that free up your brain to actually do what you needed it to do, like focus on studying?

Dinur: Absolutely. Because you start learning to see what you're looking for. You start going, “OK, even if I don't go through every single article in these twenty pages, do I know a lot more than I did when I started this?” Yes. “Can I talk about these ideas broadly?” Yes. “If there's something that needs to be brought up and I haven't read it, can I read it, make sense of it, and apply to this question?” Yes.

Adam: So, that's the basic challenges to the thought.

Now, elle luna wrote an amazing book called “The Crossroads of Should and Must.” And her question about these “should” ideas, you know, “I should be better at this, I should be right about this, I should have this down already, I should...” whatever the should is, ask it three questions.

And this is similar to what Brené Brown asks: where did you come from, “I should be better at math”? OK, where did you come from? Well that came from, again, Mrs. Stevenson. “I should be better at math.”

Are you true for me? Well, given the fact that I missed about a year of basic primary school math, that's not true. I shouldn't be better at math. There's no basis for that statement, you know? You're not true for me.

Do I want to keep holding on to you? And usually you will realize that no, I don't. I don't want to keep holding on to that, because it hurts, you know? Or because there's no evidence for it, or both!

And so these are all these different ways, so just to recap:

From Byron Katie we have the idea that “should” is just our mind fighting with reality, and then the four steps for dealing with it are:

- Do you have evidence for the thought? (and feelings are not evidence),
- Are there good reasons to stop thinking the thought?
- Is there any good, stress-free reason to keep thinking the thought?
- And what would it be like if you couldn't think the thought?

From Brooke Castillo, remember that a fact has no value judgments, a fact has no adjectives, it is just a statement of what is happening: “There is a dog.” The moment you add in “frightening dog,” you have created a thought. It's not a fact anymore.

From Brené Brown, we just have the question of whose thought is this? Is it yours or is it someone else's? And if it's someone else's, are they on your side or not? Because if they're not on your side, you don't need to listen to them. They're not invested in your success.

And elle luna gives us three ways to look at “shoulds.” They're basically three questions to ask any should:

- Where did you come from?
- Are you true for me?

- And do I want to keep holding on to you?

So these are all different ways in which we can challenge our thoughts, in which we can change the way we think. Brooke Castillo has an amazing model that she created, which I've kind of touched on in different ways and it's in her first episode of her podcast, so we're going to put a link to that particular episode in the show notes, so that you can listen to that.

Let's talk now about how teachers can use this and how students can use this.

Dinur: And one of the things that I mentioned a few minutes ago is that as teachers, we have to be very aware of the power of labels that we give to students, both negative and positive. Labels can lead to outcomes that we may not think about, right? We may intend for what we're saying to come out as being very positive and very supportive, but it can lead to issues down the road.

And so one suggestion that we have is that you emphasize concrete progress, and improvement at the sources of your comments. You don't want to be mindlessly positive saying something like "You're doing fine in the class," "Oh you're good, you're fine, you're a great student." You want to say, "I'm really seeing how you're engaged with this material I saw how you really like this lesson. Something about this seems to really piqued your interest. You're super curious about that."

Work with that, that's something that's concrete. If you see a student who struggled early on in the class, and others doing a little bit better, don't just be mindlessly positive and say "nice job." You want to say, "I can see that you struggled with X, but I'm really saying you improve on that and I'm really proud of that improvement." You're focusing on the action. You're focusing on something concrete. And that's something that the student can turn to later on, as a reference point. The reference point is something that's outside of them, and that means that it's something that isn't inherent to them, and it's something that they can repeat.

Adam: And another thing you can do, too, is if you get a student who's really stressing out, you could see that they're really stressing out, like they come to your office hours and they're like "I am not going to be able to pass this test, I'm so stupid, I'm so stupid." If you start hearing anything like that, guide them through these steps. Challenge their thoughts. Teach them how to challenge their own thoughts. Get a student to articulate where the thought is coming from. Is this something that they were told by a teacher in fifth grade? Is it something that their parents said? Is it something another professor has said recently (and if they did, shame on them!)?

Recognize that if they can articulate the source of where their thought came from, they will often have an easier time, or at least a less difficult time, challenging the thought and setting up a new thought to take its place.

And it's really important that we recognize that the stress that they're feeling is very much a part of their lives. We can't make the stress go away. But what we can do is give them the tools to say "that thought is not helping you. What's a thought that will lead to the results that you want? Because this thought is leading you to believe that you're going to fail, and that's making it much more likely that you will." Self-fulfilling prophecy, right? If a student walks into an exam thinking they're going to fail, their chances of failing go way up, because they don't feel like they can do anything to change that outcome. So it's important to take the steps and guide the students through them.

Dinur: And for students, one of the big suggestions that Adam and I have is, as odd as it sounds, be empirical with yourself. Focus on you as objectively as you can. Take a step outside and say, "how would someone else look at me right now?"

And that means you've got to be very self-aware. "Am I feeling stressed out because I'm tired? I haven't

gotten enough sleep.” “Am I feeling overworked? I just worked an extra shift and I've got an early class, and combined with that, I don't feel very good going into this test.” Something like that.

Adam: And another way to do this is to learn how to meditate. And meditation is not a religious practice. It's just a way of - today I read that, you know, if you meditate, what you're trying to do is keep your brain focused on something and notice when your brain tries to distract you, because your brain is mean. All right? Castillo's description of your brain is “a toddler with a knife.” The way I think of it is “a puppy.” And your brain's a puppy, and it goes romping all over the place, and it tears into you in different ways, and it digs up old feelings that you thought you'd buried, and old messages, and suddenly, you know, you will feel that floating across your mind: “you're the worst student in the world!” And you're hearing that your second-grade teacher's voice.

Well, if you learn how to meditate a little bit, you can learn how to say, “oh, that's a thought,” and then go back to: I'm focusing on my breathing, or, I'm focusing on whatever you're visualizing.

And one of the best ways to breathe comes from Brené Brown. She calls it “block breathing,” where you breathe in for a count of four, you hold your breath for a count of four, you breathe out through your mouth for a count of four, and you hold that for a count of four. You do this four times, because when you breathe and you focus on the breathing, what it does is, it slows your body down. If you're anxious, it slows your body down. Once your body slows down, it kind of cancels the alert to your brain: “we're in danger!” or, “we're in trouble, there's something wrong!” and your brain slows down, and you begin to be able to focus more.

And meditation does not mean “having a clear mind.” It means being able to say, “OK, that's thinking,” and go back to what you focus on and being self-aware.

Dinur said, “what would you tell a friend of yours who is feeling this?” Well, also, be aware that if a friend of yours is feeling this, you wouldn't be cruel to them, right? You wouldn't be beating them up with “you're SO STUPID, you're stupid!” But you are saying, “hey man” - or “hey hon” - “calm down. What's going on? Talk about what's bothering you.”

OK... if you need to explain how to calm down as if you were explaining it to a friend, what would you tell a friend of yours who was dealing with this kind of stress? What would you tell a friend of yours who is constantly saying, “I'm stupid, I'm lazy, I'm a failure”? And then, be that kind to yourself. Because if you're mean to yourself, you're just going to increase your stress. And I gotta tell you, there's research on this: kicking yourself, beating yourself up has never improved performance. All it does stress you out more.

Dinur: And - I'm jumping back to teachers for a quick second - if you have a student that opens up about this stress, recognize that that stress is extremely real for them. And one thing that I'll do is, I'll walk with students after a class. I will offer maybe to get a cup of coffee with them. And I tell them, I ask them to articulate, to talk about it. And I tell them, like, they're not so different from us. We've been stressed as students, just as they are. And so we can talk and go, “OK, here's how we can handle it,” and “here is how we can overcome this stress.” We may not be able to make that stress go away, but we can make it something manageable. And that's a skill that comes in really, really, really handy, because life, by its very nature, can be very stressful.

Adam: And if you learn how to change your thinking, if you learn how to manage your thinking, that goes a long way towards managing your stress. Because your stress comes from the way you're thinking about things. And so, just take a little time to review the steps, to review these different tools that we've gone over today. Take a look at Castillo's podcast, because I've got to say, I've learned a ton from her, I've learned a ton from Byron Katie, I've learned a ton from Brené Brown - and we'll be putting links to these folks in the show notes so that you can find them.

So that's it for Episode 9! And next week is our first guest episode! And so, every tenth episode, we're going to have a guest come in and talk about their research or their work on what they know about student learning. And this coming week, in episode 10, we're going to talk with Dr. Stacy Smith, who is an expert on student writing and is currently writing a blog for you to go and take a look at, so that you can understand what it is that you need to do, in order to improve your writing at the college level.

And so we'll see you back—

Dinur: --next week.

Adam: You've been listening to Learning Made Easier, a podcast about how we learn, how we teach and how they overlap.

Dinur: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

Adam: If you want to support us, please go to www.patreon.com/learningmadeeasier

Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week.