

You Don't Have to Believe Your Thoughts

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For many years, I was an expert at making myself miserable by taking a neutral thought, turning it into a stressful one, and then spinning that stressful thought into an even *more* stressful story—one with little or no basis in reality.

In my new book, [How to Wake Up](#), I call this tendency “storytelling *dukkha*” (*dukkha* being the word that the Buddha used to describe suffering, stress, and just plain unhappiness). To illustrate my expertise at this, here are two neutral, fact-based thoughts:

“A friend is coming over today.”

“I have an appointment with a new doctor next week.”

Each of these thoughts states a fact, free of emotional content. But then, driven by worry and anxiety over my health, I'd turn them into stressful thoughts:

“My friend's visit won't go well.”

“The doctor's appointment will be a disaster.”

(An aside: Stressful thoughts are not reserved for those with health problems. Before I got sick, I could easily worry and fret about my family, my job performance—you name it!)

Back to my examples. Having turned each of the neutral thoughts into stressful ones, the storytelling would begin:

“My friend will stay much longer than I'm able to visit, but I won't have the nerve or the discipline to tell her I need to lie down. Then it will take me days to recover and I'll be mad at myself for not speaking up.”

“The doctor won't believe how sick I am. He might even think it's all in my head. And even if he does believe me, he won't want the hassle of having to deal with a complex case with no easy fix.”

As Buddhist teachers like to say, the suffering is in the stories.

In this article, I want to share a practice so powerful that I devote an entire chapter to it in my book, [How to Be Sick](#). It's a technique developed by a teacher (who's not Buddhist) named Byron Katie. She calls it “inquiry” or “four questions and a turnaround.”

At the outset, it helps to recognize that the mind is going to think what it's going to think. Trying to control the thoughts that pop into your mind is a fruitless endeavor. What matters to your well-being is not which thoughts arise but how you respond to them. If you can learn to respond skillfully, you're much more likely to keep a stressful thought from turning into a full-blown stressful story.

Here are Byron Katie's four questions—questions to ask yourself when you recognize that you're caught in the net of a stressful thought:

1. *Is the thought true?*
2. *Am I absolutely sure that it's true?*
3. *How do I feel when I think the thought?*
4. *Who would I be without the thought?*

Before addressing Byron Katie's fifth step—the *turnaround*—I'll apply her four questions to the two stressful thoughts in my example. In writing this, I'll answer the way I would, but as you read it, try thinking of how you'd answer each question. I'll start with my friend's upcoming visit.

1. *Is it true that her visit won't go well?*

“Yes, I think it's true.”

2. *Am I absolutely sure it's true that it won't go well?*

“Hmm. I guess I'm not *absolutely* sure. I'm not even 75% sure.”

Sometimes just seeing that you're not absolutely sure that a stressful thought is true is enough to stop the thought in its track and keep you from turning it into a stress-filled story.

3. *How do I feel when I think that my friend's visit won't go well?*

“I feel even more nervous and worried about the visit and, worse, now I'm dreading it.”

In this particular situation, dread is more painful than worry, because the dread carries guilt with it: I love my friend yet, here I am, dreading her visit. This definitely does not feel good!

4. *Who would I be without the thought that the visit won't go well?*

"I'd be a person living in the present moment, with a chance to enjoy the day I'm in right now, instead of being lost in worry and anxiety about tomorrow."

Now I'll try the same technique with the doctor's appointment.

1. *Is it true that the doctor's appointment will be a disaster?*

"Yes, it's true. They always are."

2. *Am I it absolutely sure it's true?*

"I suppose not. Perhaps I was exaggerating a bit when I said, 'They always are.'"

3. *How do I feel when I think it will be a disaster?*

"I feel scared and I feel angry. I'm scared that I'll be disregarded again. I'm angry that I'm sick because that's why I have to go to all these [insert expletive] doctor appointments in the first place!"

4. *Who would I be without the thought?*

"I'd be a person living *this* day instead of worrying and feeling anxious about something that's a week away."

Pausing to let my response to Question #4 sink in is always helpful, because it switches my focus to the present moment. If I stop here though, I'm likely to drift back to stressful storytelling, so it's important to move on to Byron Katie's *turnaround*.

In the turnaround, you take the stressful thought and turn it around—change it—in a way that works for you individually (there's no one "right" turnaround). Then the instruction is to come up with three reasons why this new thought might be true.

I'll start with my friend's visit. Here's my turnaround: **My friend's visit *will* go well.**

What are three reasons why this might be true?

- 1) Maybe she'll be sensitive to my limitations and will only stay a short time.
- 2) Maybe I'll be having a good day and the length of her visit won't have a negative impact on my health.
- 3) Maybe she'll have another obligation coming up and won't stay long.

In coming up with reasons why the turnaround might be true, I've found that it's helpful to be creative in my thinking, even if it becomes absurd. For example, one reason could be: "Maybe she'll get an upset stomach and have to leave early." This isn't even nice (!), but letting my imagination go wild helps shake me loose from the rigid thinking I've fallen into that has me believing there's only one possible outcome for this visit: it won't go well.

In sum, coming up with multiple reasons for why the visit might go well drives home the point that there's no reason to believe the stressful thought that it won't go well. This enables me to stop fretting and just wait and see how the visit unfolds.

Now, to that doctor's appointment. My turnaround: **The doctor's appointment will be a success.**

What are three reasons why this might be true?

- 1) The doctor might be friendly and a good listener.
- 2) The doctor might be sympathetic and understanding about my illness.
- 3) The doctor might be honest with me about what he can and cannot do to help.

When I reflect on the two dozen or so doctors I've seen about my illness, a few of them have been just like I described above, so why should I decide ahead of time that the appointment won't go well, even if the odds are against me? After all, if my stressful thought turns out to be true and the appointment *is* a disaster, it won't be because of my worrying and stress-filled storytelling about it. No doubt about it: my time could be better spent in the days leading up to the appointment!

Byron Katie's "four questions and a turnaround" has been a gift of inestimable value to me. It's such a relief to know that *I don't have to believe my thoughts*.