

Training Our Trains of Thought by Kristi Nelson

Difficult mental and emotional patterns can teach us a lot about developing positive patterns, if we approach our tendencies mindfully, compassionately, and with gratefulness.

I used to be a person who, though unusually optimistic and resilient in many ways, could often be prone to a negative train of thought I now playfully refer to as “awful-izing.” I have also heard this propensity called “catastrophizing.” Regardless, once aboard this train, it can take you a long way down some dark tracks before you realize you are not at all where you hoped or intended to be.

The distinguishing qualities of a negative train of thought would be somewhat as follows:

Something difficult or disappointing happens, or we hear some “bad” news. This is the “engine.” Negative thoughts and/or feelings begin attaching themselves to responding to this event, like cars on a train.

After a period of repetitive indulgence, the negative thoughts and beliefs begin building a story and making a case to prove themselves true and/or worthy, and the engine starts chugging down the tracks.

Like a big magnet, the original negative thought starts seeking and amassing all forms of reinforcing experiences, data, and external validation – picking up more train cars along the way.

Then, unconsciously, we can begin to act in ways that corroborate and buttress our negative beliefs, creating additional reasons and reinforcing experiences to justify a dour outlook.

Finally, with way too many moments (hopefully not hours or days) slipped by, we can find ourselves with a big, brooding, bummed-out, self-righteous worldview with which to contend. Station Stop: The Blues. Next Stop: The Dumps.

And we wonder, “How did I get here?”

I admit my awfulizing tendency somewhat tentatively, but also assured that I am not the only person occasionally prone to these kinds of “habits of mind.” I also share this because I believe that difficult mental and emotional patterns can teach us a lot about developing positive patterns, if we approach our tendencies mindfully, compassionately, and with gratefulness.

The essential insight—that thoughts and feelings come and go, and that we may have

thoughts, but they do not have us—can spark a small revolution in anyone open to the teaching.

Mindfulness helps us to stop in our tracks, and take a breath. It wakes us up out of sleepwalking or escalating our way through life, and develops and deepens our capacity for awareness in the moment. Mindfulness helps us watch the mind without judging, or getting carried away with a story about how its thoughts are good or bad, inappropriate or anything other than simply thoughts arising and fading away. The essential insight—that thoughts and feelings come and go, and that we may have thoughts, but they do not have us—can spark a small revolution in anyone open to the teaching. Seeing each thought or feeling as what it is and temporary, mindfulness can help keep identification with our mental states at bay, contain an emotional drama, allow for self-compassion, and even help slow a careening locomotive.

Gratefulness incorporates and builds on mindfulness; once we have paused, it purposefully shifts our awareness into direct curiosity, focus, and action, and can help re-direct the mind's attention toward something at those moments when a shift in attention - or change of tracks - is called for.

Grateful living can help to re-train the neural pathways that looked for something wrong to now look for things that are going well, or at least to identify opportunities available to us.

Grateful living practices do an extraordinary job of filling space where habits of mind such as awfulizing leave off; they move adeptly through the same neural pathways that negative thought patterns lay down in our minds and find their groove on the same tracks. By offering a replacement focus for our attention, grateful living can help to re-train the neural pathways that looked for something wrong to now look for things that are going well, or at least to identify opportunities available to us. Where we once may have sought to reinforce a sense of scarcity, we begin to more readily look for, and see, what is sufficient in our lives. A focus on unmet expectations can be replaced by a greater focus on lifting up appreciation. And when we are longing for more reasons to be happy, turning our attention to notice what we already have, and are grateful for, can truly be a turn-around.

The way I see it, I am built with the ability to know how to orient toward a positive train of thought precisely because of my experience with awfulizing. I clearly already have the established mental musculature for:

- allowing a thought or feeling to impact me deeply,
- directing my attention to notice everything that reinforces that thought,
- carrying the thought-pattern through to a powerful destination,
- getting good at a habit through repeated practice.

Given that our minds and feelings are capable of taking us on great adventures at a moment's notice, hopping aboard a grateful train of thought may be a good way to keep ourselves focused and on track...

Trains of thought have significant impact, no matter which ones we ride. Knowing that we have the capacity to direct and re-direct our attention, and committing to practices which

help us to remember and strengthen this capacity, is empowering. As I have become increasingly invested in reducing suffering in my life and in the world, I know that getting myself habituated to new ways of traveling is necessary.

Gratefulness as a “habit of mind,” and living gratefully as a way of being, awaken us to notice and nourish the things in life for which we are truly appreciative, but often take for granted. Given that our minds and feelings are capable of taking us on great adventures at a moment’s notice, hopping aboard a grateful train of thought may be a good way to keep ourselves focused and on track, and to actually end up where we had intended and hoped to be.