Are You Aware of Your Thoughts?

An Exercise for Change excerpt from *Rational Thinking* by Peter Shepherd

An event is interpreted, judged and labeled in such a way that a particular emotional response is inevitable. You are constantly describing the world to yourself, giving each event or experience some label. You make interpretations of what you see or hear, you judge events as good or bad, painful or pleasurable, you predict whether they will bring danger or relative safety. Since childhood people have been telling you what to think. You have been conditioned by family, friends and the media to interpret events in certain ways.

These labels and judgments are fashioned from the unending dialogue you have with yourself, and color all your experience with private meanings. The thoughts are constant and rarely noticed, since they are without prior reflection or reasoning, but they are powerful enough to stimulate your most intense emotions. Such “self-talk” is often composed of just a few essential words or a brief visual image, acting as a label for a collection of painful memories, fears or self-reproaches. They would be seen as unrealistic, exaggerated and over-generalized if reviewed objectively, but in practice they appear automatically in response to stimuli. They just pop into the mind and are believed without being questioned or challenged, nor are their implications and conclusions subjected to logical analysis.

Automatic thoughts are often couched in terms of “should”, “ought” or “must” and their negatives. Each iron-clad “should” precipitates a sense of guilt, or loss of self-esteem. Also automatic thoughts tend to be pessimistic, always expecting

the worst and are the major source of anxiety. Because they are reflexive and plausible, automatic thoughts weave unnoticed through the fabric of your own (conscious) thinking. They seem to come and go with a will of their own and they also tend to act as cues for each other – one depressing thought triggering a chain of associated thoughts reinforcing the depression. To consider something is awful, is to attach a self-created traumatic tag to what is in reality simply what is there.

Preoccupation or obsession with one type of thought causes tunnel vision, in which only those aspects of existence that support that way of thinking are recognized. The result is one predominant and usually quite painful emotion, such as chronic anger, anxiety or depression. Tunnel vision is the foundation of neurosis and is the opposite of awareness.

Increasing awareness requires noticing and questioning automatic thoughts, particularly those which are causing continued painful feelings. Regard your thoughts as a slow-motion film. Look at your internal dialogue frame by frame – notice the millisecond it takes to say “I can’t stand it”, or the half-second image of a terrifying event. Notice if you are internally describing and interpreting the actions of others: “She’s bored … He’s putting me down”.