

## **Chapter 24 – Introduction to reframing distressing thoughts with insight and kindness**

A long time ago in a time that is beyond time, there was a pleasant little village in the country with a rock wall around it and a little gate near the road where people came into the village from the countryside.

On a bench by the gate sat an old wise man. He liked to sit still and look out over the fields. On a lovely spring day he looked down the road and beyond through the fields to the woods and into the distance. He looked out just to see whatever came up.

On this day, after a quiet morning, along came a young man who seemed to be in search of something. He was walking down the road with determination, but seemed lost in his thoughts, looking down and kicking at the ground every now and then. He stopped at the gate and asked the old wise man, “Tell me, what’s this village like? What are the people like? Are they kind? Are they helpful? What’s it like to live in this village?”

The old man looked at him carefully for a while and then said, “Well, tell me about the place where you come from. What’s that like?”

“That town!” exclaimed the young man. “I hate that town. I don’t feel comfortable there. People are not very nice to each other. There is a lot of arguing and conflicts and frustration. Nobody understands me there. I am fed up with that place; that’s why I left.”

The old man at the gate nodded while he listened, then after a while said, “Well, you know, you might find this village to be a lot like the one you just left.”

“Well, if that’s true” said the younger man, “Then I’m moving on and I’m going to find another place.” So he moved right through the little village, hardly noticing anything about it, and kept on searching.

A little while later another young fellow came walking down the road. He was looking up, enjoying the birds and the wind blowing through the grasses on this fresh spring day. As he approached the old man, he too asked, “Tell me, what’s this village like? What are the people like? Is it a nice place to settle down and raise a family?”

Again the old man paused and looked at him carefully, then asked, “Well, tell me about the place where you come from. What’s that like?”

“Oh, it’s a lovely place, a wonderful place. Our village is prosperous and the people are generally happy. We try to be kind to one another.” Then he paused to think for a minute. “Everybody is very special there, very different from one another. We like it that way. We all appreciate the differences in each person. We try to get along and we are kind to one another. When people are sick or unhappy we surround them with loving attention. My family and friends were very kind to me there. I loved it there but I have come exploring, seeking my fortune, and I just wondered if this village would be a nice place to settle down.”

The old man at the gate nodded and said, “Well, you know, you might find this village to be a lot like the one you just left.”

Tim is silent to mark the end of the story. “What’s happening here?” He asks.

Someone shouts out, “You are the village!” Another calls out the title to one of Jon Kabat-Zinn’s books: “Wherever You Go, There You Are.” Finally, a wise old woman calls out from the back, “Your attitude determines how you experience the world.”

“Yes.” Tim responds enthusiastically. “We bring our own attitudes and our own perspective into a situation. Then we project these onto that situation. Then the situation becomes whatever it is that we project onto it. It is almost like the world is a blank screen and our minds are the movie projectors.”

Thus begins the teaching of a powerful skill you will learn in this section of the book. The skill is called “reframing distressing thoughts” or simply “reframing” which is based in a mindful approach to thoughts joined together with cognitive psychology. It’s a technique that can help you feel better by examining and changing your thoughts with mindfulness, insight, and kindness.

Learning to reframe has many benefits. You can begin to move away from repetitive thoughts and attitudes that pollute your world and begin to tap into

the inherent beauty, goodness, and peace that exist outside and within yourself.

Reframing can empower you to get the best care from the medical system, cutting through to the truth when making practical decisions. This skill also provides an approach to working with your fears, whether they are about cancer recurrence, dying, leaving loved ones behind, or any other major issue in your life. Reframing is exceptionally potent in improving your relationships—in your home life, at work, and especially in your relationship with yourself. As you practice this skill, you can literally transform yourself, reclaiming your wiser and more compassionate traits and then bringing them into your world.

Reframing and eliciting the relaxation response work well together and settling yourself down when you're stressed will help you reframe more effectively. Both reframing and tapping into the relaxation response require mindfulness. During a stressful situation you need to be mindful of your physical sensations and emotional response as the first crucial step in calming yourself down. With reframing you need to extend your mindfulness further by watching the thoughts that come up in your mind and how your thoughts make you feel. Imagine an inner scientist who types out every one of your thousands of thoughts every day. By practicing mindfulness, you can begin to read this printout as it is being typed out in real time. As a distressing thought comes up, and especially if it repeats itself, you can recognize it, watch what sort of reaction it is causing, and work to “reframe” the thought in a kind and wise way.

When you can see the thoughts as thoughts and the feelings as feelings and not get them mixed up you can empower yourself towards freedom from self-created confusion. With practice you will begin to see the repeating patterns in your life and the interconnection of your thoughts, emotions and your physiological states. Ultimately, by reframing distressing thoughts you can also reduce the causes of your stress and promote natural healing on all levels.

There are a couple of important points to keep in mind. First, this is not just “positive thinking”, where we replace a so-called “negative” thought with a “positive” one. An example of positive thinking occurs when our reaction to thinking about a recurrence of cancer is to automatically block out that thought with another thought. The thought “I am terrified of a recurrence”

becomes “I’m going to beat this cancer.” Trying to force change in our mind is like trying to push an elephant or an adolescent—the harder we push, the more resistance we provoke. In many cases this approach is really nothing more than denial. Instead of blocking the thought we can actually investigate it closely. The thought “I am terrified about recurrence” becomes a catalyst to look at the source of the fear. If the fear is transformed through with intelligent inquiry, awareness, and honouring oneself then a whole new perspective on the idea of recurrence may be discovered.

Another problem with wearing a mask of positive thinking over the face of churning emotions is that it can create division and conflict within ourselves. Instead, we can acknowledge that difficult situations will arise. Suffering is inevitable. The purpose of reframing is not to make all that “bad stuff” go away; it can’t and won’t. The purpose of reframing is to clear away the added, extra suffering that we can bring upon ourselves with distorted thinking. We can learn not to worsen the baseline truth of things as they are with distorted thoughts and perceptions.

Another key reframing concept is to see the thoughts about a situation as separate from the situation. Thoughts are an interpretation, one narrow view. They are not the whole picture. But because we are fooled over and over by believing our thoughts, we don’t look at things with an inquisitive mind. Instead we can end up in a trance of our own making.

For example, if you think, “My spouse is unsupportive. He should be helping me more,” you can only see the situation as framed with your thoughts and expectations. There may be a lot more that you do not see. Maybe your spouse is actually scared and needs support, not judgment. Maybe your spouse doesn’t know what would be helpful and needs practical advice as to what to do. Maybe they could be very supportive, but they think they should be giving you “lots of space”.

Over the years a number of people attending the retreats have continued to angrily point the finger at the situation (“My spouse is not doing enough to support me”). They fight against the first important step of acknowledging that they have thoughts about the situation that are separate from the situation. They continue to list all the things that their spouse is doing that are unsupportive, thus reinforcing their own position. With the essential first insight, “My thoughts about my spouse are causing most of my anger,” comes the opportunity to really practice this life altering skill.

We are responsible for what we think and we are responsible for our feelings. When people say, “That person makes me so mad,” what they are really saying is, “I am making myself powerless over my feelings by blaming my feeling on that person.” It takes strength to admit that we are responsible for our own reactions to any situation, but accepting this responsibility is also empowering. It allows us to focus our life energy on the things we can control and move toward greater levels of healing.

Like the wise people you will read about in the next few chapters, we all have these unhelpful thoughts from time to time. We’re especially likely to think in distorted ways when under extreme stress. In the same way that we want to be caring and compassionate to our bodies when we suffer ongoing stress, the reframing process works much more effectively when we are kind to ourselves during our reframing. When we can let go of judgmental thoughts and guilty feelings for thinking these thoughts in the first place, we can move forward. Distressing thoughts are natural and human; so is our capacity to reframe them with love and wisdom.