

Chapter 25 - Working through “I can’t do it”

One system of reframing distressing thoughts is a three-step process based on the work of Dr. David Burns, a psychiatrist who wrote the classic book ‘Feeling Good’. The first step in reframing is to be mindful of the distressing thought. By writing them down it is easier to recognize what we have been saying to ourselves. The second step is to investigate this thought carefully by asking ourselves what emotions follow from this way of thinking, whether the thought is helpful or harmful, and in what ways the thought may be exaggerated or irrational. The third step is to use a kind and rational approach to reframe the thought. By gaining awareness we can step outside of our thinking and actually change the way that we think. The analogy is like a parent who comforts a child having nightmares. When the child is terrified we say, ‘look honey it’s okay, you’re safe. I’m going to be here with you. Everything’s going to be fine.’ We can dispel the nightmare with kindness, a sense of security, and through logic and truth. The child can begin to relax. We can learn to speak to ourselves with the same voice that our wise grandmother or a close friend would speak to us. This process actually changes our psychology and teaches us to be kind to ourselves.

We begin to work with automatic and distressing thoughts by using a piece of paper divided into three columns to represent each of these steps (see the diagram). At the weekend retreat we take the group through several examples, using this three-column technique and asking them to come up with their own ways of reframing example thoughts.

The first distressing thought arises out a scenario in which someone going through chemotherapy is physically tired and fed up. In the first column, under the heading ‘Mindful of distressing thoughts,’ is entered the person’s distressing thought: “It’s no use. I don’t have the strength to get through this.”

How is the thought separate from the situation? The situation is that the person is very tired, they have suffered side effects of treatment and they are feeling emotionally raw. The thought ‘It’s no use, I don’t have the strength to get through this’ is extra and causing additional suffering.

When we see that thought coming up and realize it is not helping us, we can actually start working with the thought itself. So next we ask the group to consider the questions in the second column, under the title “Awareness

inquiry”: What sorts of emotions follow from this way of thinking? A flurry of words echo in the room: Defeat, despair, frustration, helplessness. Tim, the co-leader, points out that all these emotions cause us to feel like giving up.

I mimic someone suffering from depression. I slump forward towards my laptop, my arms folded over my heart, face down, hiding a frown. It’s obvious that ‘giving up’ has both psychological and physical effects.

Is this feeling of helplessness actually helping? A quick staccato of “NO”. It’s knocking the person’s energy down. It’s harmful.

The last question in the second column is ‘Is this thought exaggerated or irrational?’ It’s a tricky question so we ask the group pretend to be lawyers. How they would to pick holes in this sentence if they were in court. How would you say the thought isn’t quite right? Where do they see that it is exaggerated beyond the truth of the situation?

Cheryl Ann, who now leads a national charity and has worked with a difficult cancer and side effects of her therapy for years, begins, “You can’t say that you don’t have the strength to do this because this is the first time you’ve done this before.”

I respond, “Right. This is all new territory and the fact is you are getting through this. You’re here; you’re alive. Therefore it’s actually not really true. You do have the strength.”

Anne is trying to get her life on track after being treated for ovarian cancer with surgery and chemotherapy. Her voice is a bit shaky. “Initially that may be how you feel—from there you can possibly find the strength. It’s not finite.”

Tim replies, “Yes! You don’t want to freeze the situation into a thought or make it true just because you believe it. These thoughts have a lot of power to shape your ongoing experience. If you look closely, you see that the truth is always shifting and changing, never frozen.” The group is starting to see through the “black or white” thinking implied in “It’s no use” And “I don’t have the strength.”

Tim outlines the idea of relaxing into the experience of not knowing what's going to happen. When we panic in the face of the unknown, we tend to generate a lot of thoughts to create an illusion of knowing what's going to happen. This can cause further distress, especially if we have been conditioned to think about worst-case scenarios. This way of thinking can become what is called the fortune-teller error—predicting one's demise. The fact is that we don't really know what's going to happen in the future, it is better to learn to relax with that truth. Otherwise, thoughts like "I can't cope" and "It's no use" do not help you but actually make you feel worse.

The next step takes the group to the third column where we step back from the distorted thought and look at the whole situation with our rational mind, creating a reframe that is both wise and kind. What would your loving grandmother say to you if you shared that distressing thought 'I can't cope'? Is there a way to reframe this way of thinking?

After a long pause, Cheryl Ann says, "I have to get through this. It's non-negotiable. I'll just have to do it!"

Tim is quick to caution about using that tone of voice with oneself. "That sounds like it puts a lot of pressure on you. That's kind of like the pushy angry parent that says, 'You have to do that.' But you could say 'I will' get through this. The specific words that you use are very important, because when you're talking to yourself like that you can feel pressure. Be careful of the 'shoulds' and 'have to's', right? When you say 'I will' or 'I can do this,' it's much kinder to yourself and therefore more effective."

Trudy, a retired flight attendant who struggled with leukemia for years, asks, "can you acknowledge that this is a difficult time?"

"Oh, for certain." Tim continues, "It's very important to be honest about how you feel. Even to be honest with yourself about your level of despair. First own your emotions completely, feel them, then look at what you can do about it."

Trudy follows up. "Oh! So, I don't have to get too involved all at once. I don't have to eat the whole elephant today."

Tim continues on this theme "No, you don't have to! Most important is to be kind to yourself and to pace yourself. Dr. David Byrne, who introduced this

technique, used the example of imagining all the meals that you eat in your whole life placed in a football stadium. If you were asked to eat all that food, you'd say, 'Oh my god, I could never eat all that food!' But the truth is that over your lifetime that's how much food you will eat. So when we break up the challenge into little bits it becomes workable and we don't overwhelm ourselves—we can take baby steps.”

Cora Lee, a young teacher whose husband is facing a bone marrow transplant for an aggressive form of leukemia, says, “I just wanted to add, encourage yourself by saying ‘I've done hard things before - I can do another one.’”

There's a different tone of voice coming through here—like a good friend or a wise coach who gives you encouragement to draw on your inner strength and resilience without minimizing the difficulty in the situation. When you develop that wise and compassionate part of yourself, you will find many ways that you can help reframe your thinking to take yourself forward.

I finish with sharing how we reframed this particular thought. “Our reframing takes a slightly different perspective. This is just one way to reframe. There's no one best way.” I read from the third column which is titled ‘Kind and rationale response. “Who said that you always have to be strong? Sometimes to cry and fall apart is the best thing to do. Then it seems I find an inner strength, a higher power.”

By going into suffering you may notice that something comes up and supports you. When you stay with the feelings without judging them you start to find that there is some kind of buoyancy and resilience.