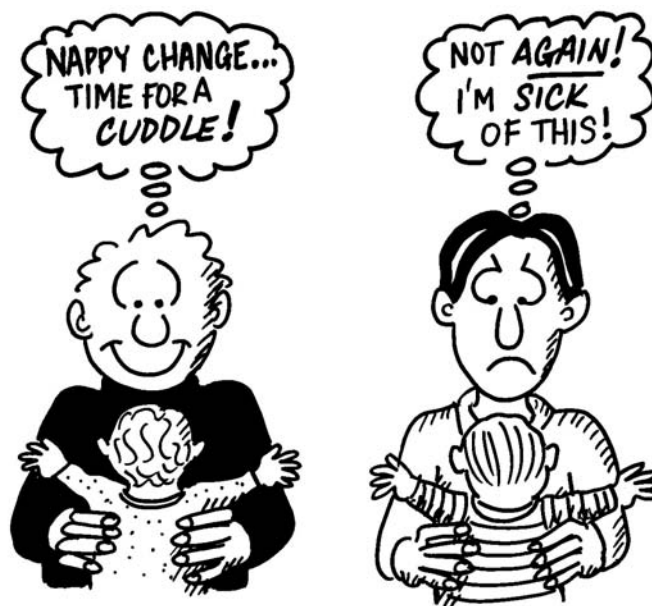


7

Healthy thinking, healthy self



As stated earlier, for most people change is stressful. However, one factor which influences *how* stressed you get is *how you think about it*.

This is not a new idea. The ancient Greeks knew it and even Shakespeare had Hamlet say, '... there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.' Given that most new parents experience a range of uncomfortable feelings and confusing thoughts, these are explored more closely in this chapter.

As you can see from the picture above, these two dads were faced with the same situation but experienced it differently as a result of their thoughts!

How do you think?

Imagine the following scene: You have an important job interview and just as you are leaving home you get a call from the hospital to say your mother has fallen down an escalator and

broken her leg. You still decide to go to the interview (and visit her afterwards) but by now are running late. Then you get stuck in a major traffic jam because a car in front has a flat tyre.

What thoughts or images would go through your mind?

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.....

How would you be feeling if you had these thoughts? (For example, emotions like angry, guilty, depressed, anxious, inadequate, nervous, excited, discouraged, relaxed, calm, confident.) List below the emotions you would be feeling.

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.....

How would you tend to behave or act in the interview, once you got there, if you were feeling this way?

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.....

Can you think of any other ways to think about the same situation? If you're stuck for ideas, some suggestions are shown below.

'It's lucky she only broke her leg, it would be much worse if she had received a head injury.'
Associated feeling = relief. Associated behaviours = calm and relaxed.

'I wouldn't be any use to her at the moment anyway, what she needs is to see the doctor and get a plaster cast.'
Associated feeling = realistic concern. Associated behaviour = calm and maybe a bit distracted.

'Mum would want me to go to the interview.'
Feeling = encouragement. Associated behaviour = calm and relaxed.

'It's not a catastrophe that I'm running a bit late, I'm sure the interviewers have been caught in traffic jams before. If I explain about mum they'll surely be sympathetic.'
Feeling = relief, hopeful. Associated behaviour = calm and relaxed.

'If I'm stuck in traffic, I may as well rehearse what questions I want to ask them.'

Feeling = mastery, confidence. Associated behaviour = calm and relaxed.

'The interviewers will probably be running late anyway.'

Feeling: relief. Associated behaviour = calm and relaxed.

The interaction between thoughts, feelings and behaviour

You may have noticed from the exercise above that thoughts, feelings and behaviour all influence each other in interactive ways. For example, if a person has angry thoughts, they will be more likely to feel angry and, in turn, to behave in aggressive ways. Also, if your mood is low (perhaps due to sleep deprivation or hormones), you will be more likely to have negative and distorted thoughts. This relationship works in reverse too, which means that your mood can affect your activity or behaviour. For instance, most people report that when they feel low in mood, or overwhelmed, they tend to withdraw, do less, procrastinate and neglect themselves.

The diagram below illustrates this relationship between your thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

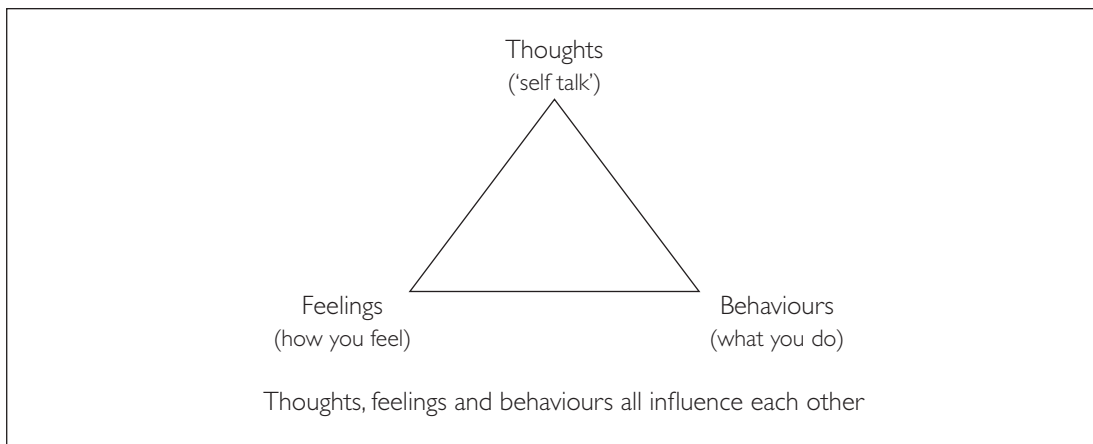


Figure 7.1 The relationship between behaviour, thoughts and feelings

From J. Milgrom, P. Martin & L. Negri 1999. *Treating Postnatal Depression: A psychological approach for health care practitioners*, Chichester, England, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Because of the interaction between thoughts, feelings and behaviours, it can be hard to know where and when to intervene to help yourself at times when you're feeling low or stressed. It's really hard to change how you *feel* by focusing on your feelings. Rather, if you want to change how you feel, changing your *behaviour* (doing something differently) or changing your *thoughts* (what you say to yourself) can be helpful.

Previous chapters have discussed behavioural components to managing stress, change and low moods by focusing on the relationship between your *behaviour and feelings*. **By deliberately choosing to do things in a different way and changing the way you**

talk to yourself, you can change your mood. This chapter explores the connection between *thoughts and feelings*.

Everyone has a typical 'cognitive style' or thinking style. That is, they tend to be optimists or pessimists. The good news is that your thoughts are under your control and you can learn to change them!



So the idea is that negative emotions can lead to negative thoughts but also that negative thoughts lead to negative emotions. The cartoon below, featured previously, shows how this new mother's interpretation of her partner's behaviour may have been distorted by her exhaustion and her state of mind.

The key idea is that *how you think affects how you feel*. So by changing your thoughts you can often (but not always) reduce uncomfortable or negative feelings, so that healthy thinking leads to a healthier self.

Sampling your thoughts

Try to focus on what you are thinking. You might like to write down as many thoughts as you can remember having today, even about mundane things. It may be easier to do this as you go through the day. Try to identify the feeling and the behaviour that would follow from that thought. Some suggestions are shown below.

'I'm always late for everything.'

Feeling = discouragement. Behaviour = Give up trying to be punctual.

'None of my friends have even rung to see how I am.'

Feeling = unloved. Behaviour = Don't call them and feel even more alone.

Now that I am pregnant I have become more popular. Everyone asks me about the baby even people I don't know well.'

Feeling: special, popular. Behaviour = more relaxed and outgoing in public.