

If I Had a Dollar...

Comparison, second-guessing, and assumption are three difficult negative thought habits to break. We may improve for a little while before falling back into our normal patterns, leaving us wondering if it was worth the effort. But every time we strive to improve ourselves brings us closer to our goal, gives us better experience, and gains us new insight.

It was a carefully programmed morning. I threw a load into the washing machine, checked e-mail, exercised, did a little gardening, put the first load of clothes into the dryer and started a second, dressed, and drove to the nonprofit consignment store where I volunteer. All before 10:30 a.m. So as I opened the door to our early customers, I was feeling pretty good about my efficiency.

And then a thought popped into my head: “During this same time, my stepdaughter packed for a business trip; got two young boys—ages eight and five—up, dressed, and fed (a circus in itself!); checked e-mails; cleaned her kitchen; took her boys to school; drove to the airport; fielded a couple of phone calls; and boarded a transcontinental flight. She is so much more productive than I!”

It wasn’t the first time I’ve had such a thought. Since beginning to

downshift toward retirement three years ago, I’ve experienced discomfort, embarrassment, even guilt as I look at how much other people are juggling. This is well-trod territory for me, driven by a well-worn habit: comparison.

As I work with clients to root out the causes of their stress, comparison comes up often. Of course, work requires us to perform to certain standards—in other words, to compare what we do with others’ requirements and expectations. That pattern begins to be ingrained even before kindergarten until it infuses every corner of our lives. And that’s the problem. Instead of savoring the richness of each moment, we spend energy looking around to see how our experience matches up against that of others or of our imaginings. From there, it’s a short trip to the worry that we aren’t good enough, or we’re missing something, or we won’t be able to keep up...on and on in a stressful spiral that’s more exhausting than digging ditches.

And that isn’t the only bad habit that I’ve bumped into lately. Number 2 on my personal hit parade: second-guessing. This little toad crawled out from under its rock for the umpteenth time when a

client called for advice regarding a personnel problem. After hanging up the phone, I reviewed what I’d told her. “Maybe I went too far, got caught up in trying to be brilliant, led her to try something that could backfire,” I thought. She’d promised to provide me an update on how her process went, but I heard nothing for days. No phone message, no e-mail. The voice in my head began to get louder: “Uh-oh. She tried your suggestion, and things blew up. She’s had to call in the lawyers and is furious with you.” A few days later, at last, my client’s name showed up in my e-mail inbox. “Things are busy, so I can’t talk this week. But I can’t wait to tell you about all the great things that are happening!”

Eclipsing even second-guessing is my all-time worst thought habit: rushing to judgment. Often this habit is spurred by assumptions or imputed motives. Last week, I was helping a fellow volunteer coordinate a project that involved moving a lot of breakable objects. We got as far as we could on Thursday, then agreed we’d reconvene on Saturday to take care of everything that needed to get done before Monday morning. But I fretted about the logistics. So on Friday, I enrolled my husband to



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work with me and got everything coordinated.

So far so good. With considerable self-satisfaction, I called my coworker Friday evening to tell her what I'd done. "That's great," she said, "because, as it turns out, I couldn't be there tomorrow."

"What!?! I thought to myself. When was she planning to tell me she wasn't coming? Was she just going to abandon me without a word or any consideration? How irresponsible! It's just like her—totally self-centered, into her own thing, forgetting her promises, yada, yada, yada."

So it was with quite an attitude

thought habits—comparison, second-guessing, assumptions/judgment—on these pages before. Indeed, I remember clearly when I had my first insights about them—while attending a series of workshops nearly 30 years ago. And yet, here I am in an entirely new millennium, falling into the same old traps. As my mother would say, "If I had a dollar for every time I..."

Here's the scenario that can hit with brutal force: Something impels us toward self-improvement. We read an inspiring book, take a dynamic class, hear a motivational speech that helps us see different

day goes by that I don't still crave a cigarette."

That took Dick aback. "If that's what I have to look forward to, what's the point?" he thought. And he marched directly to a newsstand to buy a pack of Winstons.

But the simple truth is that acting on good intentions *matters*, no matter how many times we falter. Each time we try anew, we bring more experience to the challenge. Wrestling with unhelpful habits—particularly thought habits—is never done. The work of my life is the work of a lifetime; the lessons I need to learn will keep coming up in different forms and at different levels of complexity.

My goal is no longer to conquer all my negative thought habits, to reach a level of perfection so that I will never again have a thought of comparison, second-guessing, or assumption/judgment. Rather, my goal is that I will recognize my autopilot reactions sooner, that I won't allow my thinking to hijack me so far off track or for so long, and that I will hold my thoughts more lightly.

Above all, I aspire to be compassionate with myself for having them. To recognize that all human beings suffer from negative thought habits. And, most important, we all have the deep resources—wisdom, common sense, insight, creativity—to offset them.

There's a lesson worth learning. Over and over again. **SF**

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**Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves...**

**And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now.
Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually,
without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.**

—Rainer Maria Rilke

that I opened an e-mail from my coworker the next morning.

"From the bottom of my heart, I thank you. My son has to work on an emergency project, and his wife is away. Without checking with me, my husband committed us both to taking care of our three grandkids—two of them sick—this weekend."

The outrage I'd been building deflated like a balloon. I remembered one more lesson: You never really know what's going on in another person's life or in their thinking. Spinning judgments out of assumptions is a thought habit that not only mucks up relationships, but it sends energy down a rat hole.

I've written about all of these

possibilities for ourselves. We act on insight and make a conscious effort to change, feeling good about our new patterns.

Then we're hit by a rubber-band effect: We snap back to our familiar mode. Something happens, and we find ourselves reacting in the old way, like an addict in relapse. "After all that I've done, how could I do that again," we may wail. "Was all my work in vain? Am I a hopeless case? Why even bother trying to change?"

I'm reminded of my first boss, Dick, who vowed to quit smoking on his 30th birthday. About three weeks later, he mentioned his effort to the owner of the company. "Oh, yes," she said, "I gave up smoking 25 years ago. And not a