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HUFFPOST HEALTHY LIVING

The Mental Spider That Claims to Be Us

Not too long ago, perhaps a couple hundred thousand years, an obscure primate species called "human" learned a new trick. We learned to relate events arbitrarily -- we learned to have one thing stand for another. We acquired symbolic thought.

We've been bossed around ever since.

The comedian Emo Philips has a saying that captures the situation we are in: "I used to think my mind was my most important organ. Then I noticed which organ was telling me that."

The human mind is arrogant beyond belief. Because our minds can talk about anything, and this organ between our ears thinks it knows everything. Our logical, analytical, predictive, problem-solving mind knows how to live, knows how to love, and knows how to be at peace.

Not.

Language and cognition sit on top of vast amounts of experiential, social, evolutionary, and spiritual knowledge. It claims it all, merely because symbols can refer to such knowledge (to a degree) and guide it (to a degree). It is such a powerful illusion -- this thin veneer of symbolic thought claiming unto itself substance and power it simply does not have. Our mind's claims are the metaphorical equivalent of paint claiming to be the house it covers.

If you want to pop the illusion, it helps to note that in most cases you are just two or three steps away from "I don't know." Take a simple motor movement, such as reaching out to pick up a pen. Ask your mind to explain how you do that, using words and no demonstrations. To whatever answer is given, repeat the question.

The dialogue will look something like this:

Mind: "I just reach out and grab it!"

Question: "Oh? How do you do that?"

Mind: "First, I tense my triceps."

Question: "OK. How do you do that?"

[long pause].

Mind: "Ah... well. Let me show you."

Cheater! The analytical mind can regulate what you already do, true, but even such a simple thing as reaching out was learned in another way.

If it were to stop there, the cost would be relatively limited. But there is nothing to prevent this same process from being applied to our very being. And there, we enter into something far more sinister.

Like a spider weaving a web, our logical, analytical, predictive, problem-solving mind continuously creates a story of our lives, who we are, what we are like, what will happen to us, and why. As the story grows, it can become impenetrable and self-sustaining. The story of who we are covers us like a second skin. The spider finally comes close to our ear and whispers the ultimate deception. The ultimate fraud. The ultimate con. "I am you," it hisses.

Liar!

Look, I'm glad we have logical, symbolic thought. It is a useful tool. As I look around me at this moment, 35,000 feet in the air, flying perhaps 500 miles an hour, drinking my hot coffee, I marvel at what this tool has helped us create. But it is time to wipe that spider web off of our faces. We need to learn to use this tool instead of having it use us.

Those in the acceptance and commitment therapy community use simple "cognitive defusion" methods to empower contemplative practice. These methods help people witness the key trick of mind that so readily creates human suffering.

Try each of these, one at a time, over the next week. In each case begin with a difficult, entangling, or sticky self-referential or judgmental thought.

1. Distill the thought down to a single word. Say that single word out loud, as rapidly as you can, for 30 seconds. As meaning drops away, notice also how your jaw feels. Notice the sound. Notice how the beginning and end of the word blurs one to another. When you are finished consider whether you really need to fight, resist, or be commanded by what is after all at some level a learned muscular movement and sound. Reference is a useful trick of mind but sometimes it is worth popping the illusion.
2. Write down the self-judgment. Read it, trying to connect with the punch it has. Then add these two words at the end: " -- or not." Read it again. Don't try to decide among the two versions.
3. Download the smart phone app "Songify." Say the thought into the song generation engine. Play it back to different tunes.
4. Think of how you feel at your worst when entangled with this thought. Find a time when you were a child (younger is better) when you felt that way, at least to a degree. Now close your eyes and place that child in front of you. Take time to see the child's face, hair, clothes, and shoes. Notice child's posture. Notice the child's little hands. Now focus on that face. Have the child say the difficult thought you selected out loud, as if this thought was the child's. Make sure you hear it in the child's voice. Open up to the poignancy of it. If you could actually be in this moment, what would you want to say or do? Say or do that, and make sure the child gets it. See if this image suggests metaphorically how you might better treat yourself when these thoughts get up on you.
5. For the next day, whenever you notice you are having a difficult thought of this kind, restate it this way: "I'm having the thought that..." [then add the content of the thought].

6. Close your eyes and put the difficult thought out a few feet in front of you. Then answer these questions. How big is it? Allow it to have that size. What color is it? Allow it to have that color. What shape is it? Allow it to have that shape. How fast does it go? Allow it to go that fast. How strong is it? Allow it to have strength. What is its surface texture? Allow it to have that texture. How much does it weigh? Allow it to have that weight. What is its internal consistency? Allow it to have that consistency. How much water could it hold? Allow it to have that capacity.

Now the question is this: Is there anything in this object of this size, color, shape, speed, strength, texture, weight, consistency, or capacity that you cannot have as it is (not as what it says it is)? If you find that resistance, judgment, loathing, or other reactions prevents you from doing so, put that reaction out a few feet in front of you and repeat the process.

7. Write the thought down on a card and put it in your back pocket, carrying it with you throughout the day as you choose to go wherever you choose to go. See if this physical metaphor suggests how you might carry this thought in your journey of life. It is not leaving you... but perhaps you can invite it along for the ride.

As I read my morning paper and watch yet another famous person crash and burn I wonder: Has the mental spider that claims to be us claimed another victim? In the modern world it seems to be getting harder to find a place just to be. Learning to watch thinking from a place of awareness seems to be key to us learning to use this tool instead of having it use us.

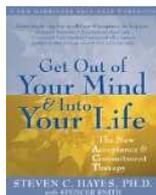
Steven C. Hayes, University of Nevada, (Author of Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life)

P.S. For those of you out there who know, yes, I tweaked the quote from Emo Philips a bit to fit this commentary. He is a comedian and I doubt if he will mind very much: He is in on the joke.

For more by Steven C. Hayes, Ph.D., click [here](#).

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