

Developing a Sound Mind (Part1)

2 Tim 1:7 (KJV)

For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

Sóphronizo = sound mind, sound reasoning, truly moderate, safe thinking, sober reasoning, controlled, disciplined

The reality is that we all have core beliefs. These core beliefs influence our immediate beliefs (rules, attitudes and assumptions). These in turn result in automatic thoughts that we have as we react to the world around us. In order to have a sound mind we need to examine, evaluate and record our thought life; mental audits. In this message we will examine these common cognitive distortions and attempt to replace them with healthier alternatives.

Core beliefs – global, rigid and overgeneralised

Immediate Beliefs – This develops as you try to make sense of the world.

Automatic thoughts – specific to the situation in which they are generated, These are like plants that grow based on the kind of soil you give them.

John 16:13a

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.

Example: John grows up in family where sporting achievement is celebrated and important. His brother is a strong sportsman but he is not as strong. His core belief is “I am useless and not worth much.” His immediate belief or assumption is “If I make a sport’s team my parents will be proud of me and I will feel like I belong.” His automatic thought when he drops a ball in cricket is, “I will always be clumsy, what’s the point of trying.”

We see that each cognitive distortion we will examine is driven by specific assumptions or misbeliefs. I like to call these guardian lies.

Ps 51:6 (Berean Study Bible)

Surely You desire truth in the inmost being; You teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

Thought leaders like Dr Gregory Popcak’s and Dr Aaron Beck’s works are very useful:

1. Filtering

These are known as mental filters or what Aaron Beck originally called selective abstraction. It is our tendency to focus on one detail and take it out of context whilst ignoring other more important parts of an experience. This mind-set works both ways. You take one negative or positive aspect and focus on it. For example if you cannot find a job you feel that God is terrible and your life is terrible. This one negative experience has left you with a darkened view of reality. On the other hand someone may think that because the rugby captain is so popular he will be a good husband one day. When some people make choices everything else is filtered out. You may not like a particular person purely because of their accent. That is filtering and it is based on a lie. The Pharisees and others had a negative opinion of the Nazarenes and said, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” This blocked them thinking, “This could be the Messiah.” Sometimes people in abusive relationships will say, “He is a good dad” or, “He provides.” They have taken one good aspect and absolved the man of everything else. That is filtering. Could it be that because of filtering you are cursing and ignoring the very people God has sent to bless you?

Another result of filtering is that often we take neutral or positive situations and literally disqualify the positive. We call it a “fluke” and think “it doesn’t really count because...” We say things like, “They are just being nice.” “He says that to everyone.” We also don’t notice the love bids that others do for us. Unfortunately this is one of the causes of prejudice. We see something positive about someone from an out-group but we dismiss it as an exception because of the school they attended. I have a cousin who experienced someone assuming she had been adopted because of how well she spoke.

2 Cor 10:5 ESV

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ

Assumption/Misbelief/Guardian Lie: The only events that matter are failures. I should measure myself by my errors.

2. Dichotomous Polarised Thinking (Black or White)

This is where the stronghold in your mind is very either/or. You are either perfect or a failure there are no shades of grey. One day you pick your children up late from school and they complain about it so you beat yourself up and label yourself a 'bad parent'. If you get 95% you are failure because you have not achieved 100%. If that is you, cast it down from your mind. Do not try to be perfect, rather say to yourself, "Am I growing as a parent?" or, "Am I growing as a person?" Otherwise you will always be disappointed. This dynamic is also known as absolutistic, dichotomous thinking. The tendency to place all experiences in one of two opposite categories. For example, flawless or defective, immaculate or filthy etc Perfectionism is a good example of this. This is why a lot of perfectionists will not start doing something unless they think they can do it perfectly. This is also linked to all or nothing thinking, which is not a realistic way of evaluating ourselves in life. All or nothing thinking is the tendency to evaluate your personal qualities in extreme, black-or-white categories. Sadly it results in us making many unfair judgments as we tend to then use superlatives in describing moderate scenarios. "He never takes me on dates!" "He always speaks horribly to me!"

Phil 2:14 – 15

¹⁴ *Do everything without grumbling or arguing,* ¹⁵ *so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky.*

Warped = Kolias = curved, winding

Crooked = Diestrammenes = to distort, misinterpret, corrupt

Some translations say "Crooked and perverse".

Assumption/Misbelief/Guardian Lie: Everything is either one extreme or the other. There are no shades of grey.

3. Overgeneralisation

Burns describes overgeneralisation as the process of arbitrarily concluding that "one thing that happened to you once will occur over and over again." This is why when someone is turned down on a date they can feel very rejected because their mindset is often "I will be lonely and miserable for the rest of my life." Often overgeneralisation causes us to have faith for the negative things. Our minds become programmed to more readily accept failure than success. You come to a general conclusion based on a single event, for example, you think your team dislikes you because your personality test scores were different. The stronghold of rejection in your mind has translated 'different' as negative instead of positive. Enjoy being different. Perhaps you have seen that people of one ethnic group are involved in a particular area of service so you come to the conclusion that this is racism. I was in a church back in the 90s and it so happened that all the musicians were white. There was a need for volunteers to assist with packing and unpacking the musical equipment and some of us offered to help. One guy that was involved became bitter because those packing and unpacking just happened to be black. He did not see that it was because we had offered. This bitterness built up and caused him to backslide. A common type of generalisation is Transference. Transference describes a situation where the feelings, desires, and expectations of one person are redirected and applied to another person.

Assumption/Misbelief/Guardian Lie: If it's true in one case then it applies to any case which is slightly similar.

4. Jumping to Conclusions

Assuming without establishing the facts. Very often we become mind readers and think we know exactly what someone is thinking but we end up doing the exact opposite. If that is you, cast it down. This is called Arbitrary Inference; the process of forming an interpretation of a situation, event or experience when there is no factual evidence to support the conclusion or where the conclusion is contrary to the evidence. E.g. Simphiwe is walking down the street thinking, "Everyone can see I am a useless fool." This is an arbitrary inference because he has no way of knowing what everyone thinks, and it is also unlikely because people have other things they are worried about.

Sometimes this affects us relationally when we apply it to other people. We become the mind reader or fortune teller. This has a negative impact when you are counselling someone who wants you to listen to them and ask them questions without jumping to conclusions. Sadly it is often more destructive when we do it to ourselves, as in the case of any people struggling with depression or anxiety. This is where one is certain that a disaster has befallen their loved one who is late coming home from work. I know some people who have irrational feelings of abandonment in the form of their spouse dying.

Ps 32:2

Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.

John 1:43 – 51

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

⁴⁶ "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip. ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." ⁴⁸ "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." ⁵⁰ Jesus said, "You believe^[a] because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." ⁵¹ He then added, "Very truly I tell you,^[b] you^[c] will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on^[d] the Son of Man."

Nathaniel might have started off expressing a cognitive distortion based on incorrect assumptions. However, it is interesting how he ended up making a U-Turn. Many of us have incorrect assumptions but we never break out of them. Nazareth was a relatively new town. It did not exist during the time of the prophets Zechariah, Isaiah and Jeremiah. It is interesting how we often make assumptions about people based on the city they come from. Could this be blocking you from your destiny helpers. The bible describes Jesus as a Righteous Branch and Nazareth actually means branch. Look at Zech 3: 8-10: ⁸ "'Listen, High Priest Joshua, you and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. ⁹ See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes^[a] on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day. ¹⁰ "In that day each of you will invite your neighbour to sit under your vine and fig tree," declares the Lord Almighty."

Assumption/Misbelief/Guardian Lie: If it has been true in the past then it's always going to be true.

5. Catastrophising

You exaggerate the importance of a single event. You may have two children and really want a third but when the school fees go up 10% you decide to stick with two. This one event has turned into a catastrophe. This is based on lies. Who said that you will never be able to afford to have another child? Is God saying that? Be careful whose report you believe. Another example is a people group saying that if a particular person becomes president they are going to emigrate. What are your decisions based on? The Bible says, 'will you be led by the Spirit of God, or by your fears?' Maybe this has become a stronghold in your mind. This is also linked to magnification where we exaggerate the impact of an event. For example, your baby vomits on your shirt and you visualise your boss being so disgusted by this that he fires you on the spot. Sometimes it works the other way round where we exaggerate the significance of eliminating someone. People have thought if that president dies then all our problems will be solved.

1 John 4:18 ESV

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

Assumption/Misbelief/Guardian Lie: The worst thing always happens so rather believe it will happen so you are prepared for it.

6. Personalisation

You blame yourself for things outside your control. You focus so much on yourself that if anything goes wrong you think it is your fault. Sometimes it works the other way round and you believe other people's behaviour is based on how they see you. You may not be invited to a function and automatically think it is because they do not like you. Meanwhile they may have a low self-image and are afraid of being rejected by you because you do not normally attend those functions. The mindset here is "the world has got it in for me!" This happens even if it was our fault that we didn't check our watch and were left behind by the bus. We all tend to be somewhat egocentric about events that happen. A common form of personalisation is the persecutory super-ego. This is where you believe that the whole world is against you. This is unfortunate because sometimes you have just been given constructive feedback that is valid but you can only see it as, "They don't like me!" "It's because I am black" etc. Watch out for this. Look how David dealt with these emotions.

Ps 31:10 – 21

¹⁰ *My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak.* ¹¹ *Because of all my enemies, I am the utter contempt of my neighbours and an object of dread to my closest friends— those who see me on the street flee from me.* ¹² *I am forgotten as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery.* ¹³ *For I hear many whispering, "Terror on every side!" They conspire against me and plot to take my life.* ¹⁴ *But I trust in you, Lord; I say, "You are my God."* ¹⁵ *My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies, from those who pursue me.* ¹⁶ *Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love.* ¹⁷ *Let me not be put to shame, Lord, for I have cried out to you; but let the wicked be put to shame and be silent in the realm of the dead.* ¹⁸ *Let their lying lips be silenced, for with pride and contempt they speak arrogantly against the righteous.* ¹⁹ *How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you, that you bestow in the sight of all, on those who take refuge in you.* ²⁰ *In the shelter of your presence you hide them from all human intrigues; you keep them safe in your dwelling from accusing tongues.* ²¹ *Praise be to the Lord, for he showed me the wonders of his love when I was in a city under siege.*

Assumption/Misbelief/Guardian Lie: I am responsible for all the bad things, failures etc that happen to me and those around me.