

Don't Believe EVERYTHING YOU THINK

By Philip Richmond, DVM, CHC-BCS, CCFP

“Don’t believe everything you think.”

I first heard this gem about eight or nine years ago on a retreat in Ohio. By that time, during my own journey of recovery and self-awareness, I had a fairly good grasp on how wrong I had been in the past — passing judgement or acting certain ways toward people and events in my life when I didn’t have all the facts. It is peculiar how a short, pithy saying can encompass so much. “What does it truly mean?” you may ask, as I did. “How can my thinking deceive me? I’m a veterinary professional. I think critically. I make my decisions everyday based on facts.”

Except, we don’t. With regard to the many situations life will put in front of us, our thought process often leads us to assuming negative outcomes. This is known as our “negativity bias.” Many of us are hard wired to think this way. However, once we learn to question and challenge our initial — and usually incorrect — thoughts on a given event or situation, we have the opportunity to change our perception. Why would we want to do that? The short and simple answer: It leads to increased happiness and a positive sense of well-being.

So how does a simple thought have the power to overtake our assessment of what we believe to be true? Let’s take, for example, a friend not calling or texting us back when we really need to speak to them. Can anyone relate to thinking, “I can’t believe they would ignore my call right now. I’ll bet it’s because they know what I’m calling about”? At this point, we may begin to question why we would have chosen such a shiftless layabout as a member of our wolfpack in the first place. We may be short with that person the next time we see him or her — or practice avoidance altogether. You find yourself harboring a resentment toward this person. A few days later, you hear that your friend’s mom ended up in a car accident an hour before you called. As the late Sheriff Buford T. Justice would say, “Oof.”

How about this one: Ever had a dream that your significant other or a friend did something that really upset you? How did you feel the next morning? I know for me, I wake up and, even though

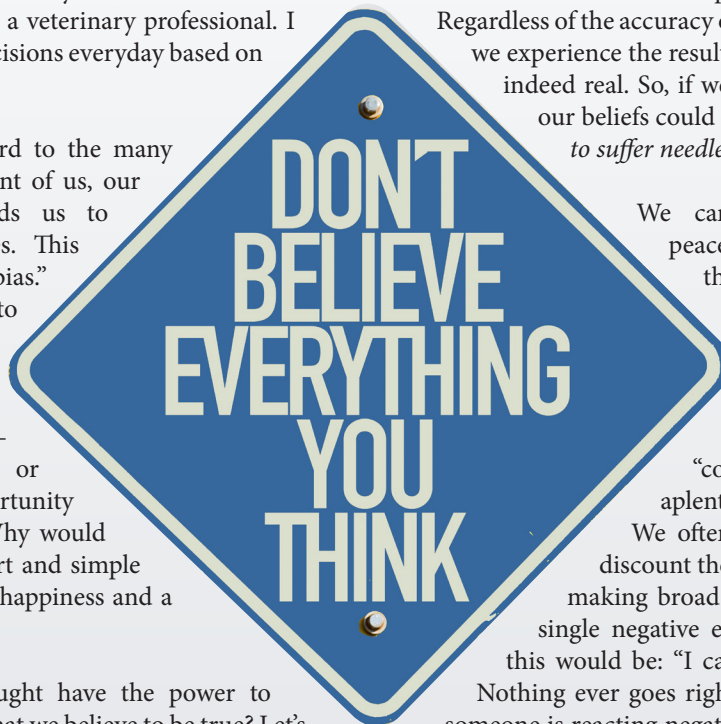
I know it was a dream, those feelings can still sting well after breakfast. Even though we know it wasn’t true, we have a strong emotional response that lingers. Similar examples can be seen with our veterinary client interactions.

The 1, 2, 3, 4 model used in behavior demonstrates the following pattern: event, thought, feeling and reaction. Our beliefs about an event elicit an emotional response. Our emotional response leads to a behavior. All the previous discussion leads us here: Regardless of the accuracy of our thoughts regarding an event, we experience the resultant emotions as though they were indeed real. So, if we aren’t certain of the facts and/or our beliefs could be irrational, *why would we choose to suffer needlessly?*

We can be happier and live more peacefully by learning how to identify these thoughts before we have an associated negative emotion and resultant bad behavior. There are some distinct thinking patterns that most of us can recognize in ourselves. These “cognitive distortions” are found aplenty with us veterinary professionals.

We often will focus on the negative and discount the positives. We will overgeneralize, making broad and negative assessments from a single negative event. A statement that illustrates this would be: “I can’t believe I lost my stethoscope. Nothing ever goes right for me.” We sometimes assume someone is reacting negatively to us, even when we have no evidence for it, for example: “I know this person thinks I don’t know what I’m talking about.” Recognizing and challenging this thinking will lead to less negative self-talk and views. Result? Our state-of-well-being meter stays above average.

Thankfully, those who have walked through this emotional forest fire before us have some effective solutions. For example, in 12-step recovery, the fourth and 10th steps deal partly with identifying resentments. The individuals will list harms we think someone has done, sees how that affects him/her internally, looks at what part the person doing the inventory played in the resentment itself and, finally, what could have been done to improve the situation. This process fundamentally changes how members of 12-step programs view the world around them.





Or as my dear, late spiritual mentor Dr. Art Waltzer, would say: “If I am not the problem, then there is no solution.” This, of course, means we often can’t change the events of the world or the people around us, but we can change our own perceptions and reactions concerning them. Making a concerted effort to shift these thoughts in the direction of positivity, or even neutrality, are the first steps in moving toward resiliency and living a happier life.

References

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Now, of course, not everyone will have the opportunity to work through a 12-step program. There are other methods to help us change our view of occurrences. Health and wellness coaches utilize a process called cognitive behavioral coaching. This is based on the work of Dr. Albert Ellis, who is considered to have been one of the most influential psychotherapists in the US. While this coaching tool can take weeks to months with professional guidance to be most effective, one aspect of this process can be put into practice today. When faced with our initial belief or thought regarding a situation or event, we challenge it with the following questions:

- What evidence do I have to support this?
- What would I tell a friend in the same situation?
- Is my thinking in this situation helping myself or others, or is it making things worse?
- Are there any other possible responses other than blaming myself?
- Is there any conceivable way to look at this positively?

Dr. Ellis said this about the transformation that can take place when we implement cognitive behavioral change into our daily lives:

“[t]he best years of your life are the ones in which you decide your problems are your own. You do not blame them on your mother, the ecology, or the president. You realize that you control your own destiny.”

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