

Inquiry, aka “Thought Work”

Four Methods

“Thought work,” also known as “inquiry,” is based on the concept that our thoughts create our feelings, our feelings motivate our actions, our actions lead to our results, and our results accumulate to become our life. Our thoughts are often not true, and untrue thoughts cause suffering. Here are four thought work methods. I use a combination in my coaching.

The Work of Byron Katie

Four Basic Questions

1. Is it true?
2. Can you absolutely know that it's true?
3. How do you react, what happens, when you believe that thought?
4. Who would you be without the thought?

Turn around the concept you are questioning, and be sure to find at least three genuine, specific examples of each turnaround.

(Turn Arouns: to the Opposite, to the Self, to the Other person.)

Further reading: *Loving What Is*, by Byron Katie.

Martha Beck’s Version of The Work

1. Find a belief that’s causing suffering.
2. Is this belief true?
3. Three concrete, empirical reasons it might not be true.
4. How do you feel and react when you’re thinking the thought?
5. Who would you be, how would you feel, and what would you do if that thought were totally eliminated from your consciousness?
6. Turnaround. Come up with as many turnarounds as possible, beginning with the original painful thought. (STICK TO THE STRUCTURE OF THE THOUGHT, REVERSING WORDS OR REPLACING THEM WITH ANTONYMS. The idea is not to come up with “the truth,” but to tease your brain into seeing that there may be many alternative thoughts, all equally true or truer than this belief.)

Further reading: *Finding Your Own North Star*, *Steering by Starlight*, *The Way of Integrity*, all by Martha Beck.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

“ACT speculates that there are two core psychological processes – ‘cognitive fusion’ and ‘experiential avoidance’ – that are responsible for most psychological suffering.” – Russ Harris, MD, *ACT Made Simple*

Cognitive Fusion: Getting caught up or entangled in our thoughts, or holding onto them tightly.

Experiential Avoidance: The ongoing struggle to avoid, suppress, or get rid of any unwanted thoughts, feelings, memories, and other private experiences. This doesn’t work.

1) I’m Having the Thought That...

- First, identify the thought that is causing suffering.
- Insert the statement “I’m having the thought that...” in front of the painful thought. Say it to yourself. Notice what happens.
- Insert the statement “I notice I’m having the thought that...” in front of the painful thought. Say it to yourself. Notice what happens.

It’s that simple! You can repeat this process any time the thought or a related thought surfaces in your mind. You’ll likely notice a sense of separation between yourself and the original thought, and a loosening of the hold that thought has on you.

2) Name Your Stories

- Identify the group of thoughts currently causing you suffering. This might be two or three thoughts on a topic or many more. You don’t have to know exactly what all the thoughts are. Simply notice that they cause suffering and are all related to one topic.
- Think of a name for this collection of thoughts – your story about this issue. This title can be simple, silly, or funny. Don’t worry about getting the “right” title – anything will do. When you notice the story surfacing in your mind, say to yourself, “Oh, that’s my [Title] Story.” (For example, “That’s my ‘I’m Worthless’ Story.”) Let the story come and go, be there or not be there. You’re not trying to eliminate it or change it. You’re just noticing it when it arrives, instead of attaching to it and fully engaging with it.

The ACT tools listed above, while simple, are quite powerful when used repetitively. Don’t underestimate their value after trying them just once. Practice them repeatedly over a span of time and you’ll discover yourself stepping into the position of the observer of your mind rather than the believer of the stories from your mind.

Further Reading:

The Happiness Trap by Russ Harris, MD (An excellent place to start with ACT. This book is simple and easy to understand.)

ACT Made Simple by Russ Harris, MD (This book is a little more robust. If you are really fascinated with ACT, this book is helpful.)

Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life by Steven Hayes, Ph.D. (This is the meatiest of the three books referenced here.)

Kara Loewentheil's Method

Kara Loewentheil's podcast, *Unf*ck Your Brain*, is a weekly deep dive into her thought work method. It consists of identifying the thought causing your suffering, and then learning to think a slightly more useful thought. Kara calls this a "thought ladder." Once that slightly more useful thought is easy, then go up a rung to an even more useful thought.

Here's an example Kara uses often: If you hate your body and you think mean thoughts about it, rather than trying to think "My body is beautiful, amazing, and perfect just the way it is," start with "I have a human body and this is how human bodies are." Once that seems easy, go up the next rung, and then the next one, until you're thinking a thought that causes you to love your body passionately and unconditionally.