# Chapter 15 Obsessive Thoughts

With cancer, the body destroys itself with out-of-control multiplication of cells. With anxiety, the soul destroys itself with out-of-control multiplication of thoughts.

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The anxiety-prone mind is like an anthill. Calm as can be until some hardship comes along and gives it a kick. Now it’s pandemonium. Frenzied, chaotic movement in every direction.

Anxiety is designed to make your mind preoccupied with the problem. A preoccupied mind will give unrelenting thought to a matter without you making any decision to do so. It’s so automatic, you can’t stop thinking about it even if you try.

That’s helpful while you’re working on a solution. But when it persists even after you’ve done all you can, the thoughts can become obsessive. You try to push them away, but they come right back. You would love to have a rest, but there’s no escape.

It might be thoughts about a broken relationship, an injustice, a horrible memory that won’t stop rising in your mind, or fear of the future. Maybe it’s incessant thoughts about your weight, your health, food, sex, or an addiction.

Psychologists would call each of those by a different name, but they all have the common underlying problem of obsessive, preoccupying, nonstop thoughts that dominate your mind. And whatever dominates your thinking dominates your life.

## Digging Ruts

There is a sign on a muddy road in Alaska that says, “Choose your rut carefully. You’ll be in it for the next sixty miles.” In a deep rut, no matter how you turn the steering wheel, the car will keep going in the direction the rut takes it.

Thoughts travel through your brain on a chain of neurons. The same message sent multiple times will create a neural pathway, like a rut in a muddy road. The presence of a neural pathway makes a thought easier to think.

This is a gift from God. He designed your brain to look for patterns and to create neural pathways. It’s why the first time you back out of a driveway it took every bit of brainpower you had, and now you can do it while tuning the radio and chatting with a friend.

The problem comes when we dig neural ruts that take us places we don’t want to go. It’s fine to think long and hard about a complex problem. But if all you’re doing is stressing about how bad the problem is or what terrible things might happen, those repetitive thoughts only dig deep grooves in your neural networks. When you strengthen those networks, you make it more likely that future thoughts will fall into those ruts and return you to those worries.

If you’re testing options, eliminating potential solutions, correcting wrong thoughts, or brainstorming new solutions, that is good. But if no progress is being made, you may only be making the negative circuitry in your brain stronger and more easily activated in the future.

How do you calm the cacophony of discord and noise in your head and regain control? The answer is in Philippians 4:8. Paul taught us how to *pray* in times of anxiety in Philippians 4:6. Now he’s going to teach us how to *think* to find peace in times of anxiety. Notice that verse 8 is sandwiched between promises of God’s peace.

Verse 7—“And the peace of God … will guard your hearts.”

Verse 8— “Whatever is true … noble … right … pure … lovely … admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

Verse 9—"And the God of peace will be with you.”

Do what verse 8 says and you’ll have peace.

If you struggle with anxiety, you might read that verse and say, “That’s beautiful, but you might as well tell me to jump over the moon. If I had that kind of control over my thoughts, I wouldn’t need this book. My whole problem is that my anxious thoughts are *out* of control. How am I supposed to discipline my thinking according to verse 8 when I can’t even get control of my thoughts?”

Are the chaotic thoughts that arise from anxiety outside of your control? Some are.

There are two kinds of thoughts—intentional and spontaneous. Spontaneous thoughts[[1]](#endnote-1) pop into your mind apart from any conscious decision to think them, and they are often triggered by circumstances.

* You’re presented with a high-pressure task and out of nowhere comes the thought, *I’m going to mess this up*.
* The doctor’s office calls. *It’s probably bad news.*
* Someone walks by without acknowledging you. *She doesn’t like me.*
* You suffer a loss. *The ball never bounces my way.*

## Where Do Spontaneous Thoughts Come From?

Such responses are often the product of habit. You’ve responded to trouble a certain way so many times that your brain formed a neural connection between trouble and that thought. So now the thought is automatic whenever you have trouble.

But what about thoughts that have nothing to do with circumstances? Unprompted, you suddenly have a random, seemingly unprompted thought. Those might arise from the interaction of beliefs, biases, memories, emotional states, and attitudes. However, they may also come from an outside source. Scripture affirms the frightening truth that Satan can plant ideas in your mind:

“Now when it was time for supper, the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas … to betray him” (John 13:2, CSB).

“‘Ananias,’ Peter asked, ‘why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 5:3, CSB).

That should be no surprise. Humans can put thoughts into your head by talking to you. Why not Satan? Satan introduced thoughts into Jesus’s mind by speaking directly to him. (See Matthew 4:3–9. The Bible doesn’t indicate whether his words were audible or inaudible.)

Yet another possible source of spontaneous thoughts is the Holy Spirit. God exerts influence on your inner man, working in you to move your will one way or another (Philippians 2:13).

Just because you have a thought doesn’t mean you’re the author of it.

## Be Suspicious of Your Thoughts

Most of us take our spontaneous thoughts far too seriously. We think just because it came to mind, there must be some truth to it. The words, “I’m a failure” pop into your mind, and your emotions take it as gospel. Psychologists call this cognitive fusion—confusing your thoughts with reality.

When a worrisome thought arises, remind yourself, “This is only a thought. Nothing more.”

Treat spontaneous thoughts like you treat any other stranger. When one first appears, you don’t know if it can be trusted. It could be from the Holy Spirit, who loves you, or from Satan, who wants to destroy you. That thought is just a random stranger that has wandered into your home. If you determine it’s not dangerous and that it may be helpful, fine. Keep it. Otherwise, send it on its way.

You make a mistake, and the old “Y*ou’re such an idiot!*” response flares up. Ask yourself: Does that sound like it’s from your Savior or the Accuser? Perhaps it’s from your subconscious mind. Could it be a false idea rising from an ungodly bias or an emotional memory? Or is it simply a habit—a way of responding to a mistake you’ve repeated so many times that it’s become automatic?

It could be from any of those sources. So until that thought is validated using the standard of Philippians 4:8, give it no more weight than you would give a random post on social media or an anonymous email.

So back to our question: Is it possible to control your thoughts? Not your spontaneous thoughts. Many of them simply happen to you. And it’s not what happens to you that steers your life, it’s how you respond to what happens to you.

That’s why two people might suffer the same hardship, and one is destroyed by it and the other does just fine. (Make no mistake—unwelcome, intrusive thoughts are most definitely hardships.) Some abuse victims thrive while others fall apart. Your well-being might rest ten percent on what happens to you and ninety percent on how you think about what happens to you. And that’s just as true when the thing that happens to you is a negative spontaneous thought.

Humans are not mere stimulus-response beings. Give a certain stimulus to a dog, and you’ll get a predictable response. But if it’s a group of humans, you’ll get a wide variety of responses because of the different ways people think. You can be radically transformed simply by thinking differently (See Romans 12:2).

### Talk, Don’t Listen

Back to our question—how do you regain control of your out-of-control thoughts? We found one method in Chapter 12—cluster your prayers of thanksgiving around the problem.[[2]](#endnote-2)

A second tactic is the approach the psalmist used in Psalms 42 and 43. He spoke to his soul.

How often have you been defeated by a spontaneous thought? You have some trouble and think, “I’m a total failure.” And you lie down and allow that thought to pummel you black and blue. Why give it that power? Recognize thoughts for what they are—thoughts. Little puffs of nothing that may or may not correspond to reality. You can rule them, or you can allow yourself to be ruled by them. You can listen to them or make them listen to you.

In his book *Spiritual Depression*, Martyn Lloyd-Jones notes that the depressed author of Psalm 42 took charge of his spontaneous thoughts by correcting them. The psalmist spoke to his own soul.

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they are talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. … Now this man’s treatment [in Psalm 42] was this: instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. … His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says, “Self, listen for moment, I will speak to you.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Never trust the voice of your troubled soul. When it gets agitated, it will lie to you about God, about circumstances, and about you. An anxious soul is untrustworthy and must be spoken to, not listened to.

## Thinking Like God

A third approach to gaining control of runaway thoughts is to counter them with thoughts that fit the description in Philippians 4:8:

“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

Look carefully at that list. What do all those terms have in common? They are all used throughout Scripture to describe God and his Word.[[4]](#endnote-4) If someone asked you what God is like, wouldn’t Philippians 4:8 be a fair summary?

The point of the verse, then, is that in times of anxiety, our thoughts must reflect God’s nature. Think like God.

Philippians 4:8 is not mainly about *what* to think but *how* to think. He’s not saying, “Stop thinking about all your troubles and instead think about something that’s true or noble or right ….” Rather, you continue thinking about the problem, but you do so from a biblical perspective. Whatever the Bible says about it, that’s God’s way of thinking about it. Think about it from that perspective, and your anxiety will dissolve.

The word translated think means *to take into consideration.* You don’t have to change the topic of your thoughts. Think about whatever you want. Just make sure you do so from the perspective of that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. It’s never sinful or harmful to think about something if you’re thinking about it the way God thinks about it.

How does God think about your problems? Is he thinking like this?:

* “I just don’t know how John is going to manage to pay his bills. I’m worried he might end up on the street.”
* “Lisa’s marriage is hopeless. I can’t imagine any way to fix it.”
* “James suffered a terrible loss. I don’t see how he’ll ever be happy again. Not even my presence will be enough to bring joy into his life now.”

Of course not. God has a different perspective on your problem. The only correct perspective. And it is when you think about the issue from that perspective that anxious thoughts will be resolved, the spigot of stress hormones will close, and God’s peace will flood your soul.

Go ahead and think about your troubles, but when you do, think like God thinks.

## Discourage Satan

If Satan is the one bringing troublesome thoughts into your mind, and you keep responding by considering what God’s Word says about the subject, do you think he’ll keep that strategy up? No. Thinking biblically is the last thing the devil wants you to do. And if the thoughts he’s putting into your mind cause you to do that, he’ll drop that tactic like a hot potato. He hates it when you think like God.

If Satan is not involved and your spontaneous thoughts are rising from your own memories, attitudes, and neural pathways, thinking like God is still the solution. The more you correct wrong spontaneous thoughts with godly conscious thoughts, the more you create new neural pathways and transform your spirit by the renewing of your mind.

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## Godliness Training Exercises

* Write down some unhelpful spontaneous thoughts that often appear in your mind in response to hardships. What biblical ways of thinking about trouble would you like to spring spontaneously into your mind when you suffer? As you suffer hardships this week, big or little, use the unhelpful spontaneous thoughts as springboards to launch you into the biblical perspective.
* Keep reviewing the verses you have memorized and add Philippians 4:8.

1. psychologists call these automatic thoughts. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Chapter 12 under the heading “When Your Mind Won’t Let Go of the Problem.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965/2002), 20–21. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “True” (*alathes*) Proverbs 22:21, “noble” (*prosphilas*) Proverbs 8:6, “right” (*euphamos*) Romans 7:12, “pure” (*areta*) Psalm 12:6; 19:9, “excellent” (*areta*) Habakuk 3:3; “praiseworthy” (*epainos*) 1 Chronicles 16:27. In the Old Testament references, the Greek word appears in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. The words translated “lovely” and “admirable” appear only here in the Bible. However, they are synonyms of words used to describe God. See Psalm 84:1 and 48:1. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)