

Just for the fun of it, I attempted to count them. Thoughts. How many thoughts bounce around inside my head? As long as I can recall, I've had them, heard them, heeded them, and, at times, hated them. But I've never counted them.

No simple task. Try it sometime. Take a pen and paper and make a mark each time you have a thought. Mark. Mark. Dot. Dash. Stroke. That's what I did. I felt like a telegraph operator from a century past.

I'm hungry. Dot.

What's he going to think? Dot.

It looks like rain. Dash.

Was I supposed to feed the dog? Dash.

Politics is going to be the end of us. Dot. Dash. Dot.

Counting thoughts was a stupid idea. Dash. Dot. Dash.

Thoughts. They heckle; they help. They remind us of regrets. They remind us to take out the trash. They convene committee meetings in the middle of the night. Like a swarm of bees, they buzz about, some making honey, others inflicting pain. No way could I count them.

The researchers at the Laboratory of Neuro Imaging, University of Southern California, did, however. According to them, your brain is a three-pound computer that processes seventy thousand thoughts each day.¹

That is a bunch. You know them. You hear them. Thoughts begin to bray when we wake up and refuse to shut off until we sleep. (Though some of them seem to keep needling while we sleep.) They are the

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inner chatter, the internal narrator who calls play-by-play on our deeds. Sometimes happy, other times grumpy. Some constructive. Some intrusive. They render verdicts on our choices. They rehash our failures, doomsday our future, and do their darndest to sour the here and now. Thoughts are everywhere.

And we are the sum of them. Positive thoughts generate positive actions. Negative thoughts activate negative behavior. Behind every angry outburst is an angry belief. Behind every kind gesture is a kind notion. Behind every jealous comment is a . . . well, you get the idea.

We are what we think. The proof is in the polygraph. The test measures the physical manifestations of invisible thoughts. During the lie detector test a person is attached to equipment that measures everything from hand temperature to breathing rate.

“Were you at such and such place on such and such day?” the tester asks. If you lie, your body tells the truth. Your hands get cold or your breathing accelerates. Not because of something you say, but simply because of something you think.

Thoughts have consequences, which prompts this question: Can we manage our lives by managing our thoughts?

Neuroscience says as much. Those who study the brain talk about *neuroplasticity*, the mutability of the brain. It is less like a chunk of concrete and more like a ball of putty. Malleable. Adaptable. The brain creates neurons and connections between those neurons throughout life. The brain is not a published book, completed early in life. It is an editable manuscript. You can, quite literally, change your mind. Just as a sculptor shapes a ball of putty, it’s possible to sculpt your brain.

Dan Harris came to believe this.

On June 7, 2004, with five million people watching, Harris had a meltdown. He was broadcasting a segment on *Good Morning America* when a wave of panic paralyzed his muscles and garbled his speech. Harris was a rising star at ABC, and the event threatened to ruin his career. In hopes of finding a solution for his crippling anxiety, he

searched for ways to regain control of his mind. He immersed himself in the science of the brain. His findings led him to write this paragraph:

Many of us labor under the delusion that we're permanently stuck with all of the difficult parts of our personalities—that we are “hot-tempered,” or “shy,” or “sad”—and that these are fixed, immutable traits. We now know that many of the attributes we value most are, in fact, skills, which can be trained the same way you build your body in the gym.²

The apostle Paul was more succinct. Our attitudes and thoughts can be “constantly changing for the better” (Eph. 4:23 TLB). Victims of our inner voices? Not necessarily. Indeed, harnessed and helpful thoughts can change our lives.

Are your days ever so gloomy? You can change that. Perpetually anxious? Abundant peace is an option. Heavied by regrets? Your past need not define your future. Hounded by inner critics? You can defang those voices in your head. You can tame your thoughts! A new “you” will appear as new thoughts begin to emerge.

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PLAY-DOH AND CATERPILLARS

The term *neuroplasticity* is not in Scripture. But “change your thoughts and change your life”? That idea is embedded in every chapter. It is the promise behind Paul’s well-known words: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2 ESV).

The apostle contrasts two types of people: one who is *conformed*, and the other who is *transformed*. One is shaped by society; the other is renewed by the work of God.

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The word *conformed* reminds me of the Play-Doh kit I played with as a kid. It came with a dozen or so containers of modeling compound. Assorted colors of clay could be pressed, smooshed, squished, rolled, squeezed, and shaped. We made ropes, rainbows, reptiles, and robots. We “conformed” the shape of the clay to our preferences.

The box also contained a set of molds. A puppy mold, a hot dog mold, and a person mold. Place the Play-Doh in the mold, close the lid, and, ta-da, you have a perfectly shaped puppy, hot dog, or person.

Nothing in the Bible would incline us to think that the apostle Paul played with Play-Doh. But abundant messages from his pen allude to the very real pressure to be conformed to the world.

We were not made to be pressed, smooshed, squished, rolled, squeezed, and shaped into the image of society.

Culture prompts us to

- value money over people,
- grade people by looks, awards, and bank balances,
- judge a person by the color of their skin,
- manipulate truth to fit our desires, and
- place our value in what we wear, drive, own, or achieve.

The mastermind behind these attacks? The devil. Satan has one primary aim: to entangle us in a web of unhealthy thoughts. He wants to corrupt, contaminate, and confuse our minds with a false system.

Remember what he did with Judas? “Jesus and his disciples were eating supper. The devil had already *put an idea into the mind* of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son. The idea was to sell Jesus to his enemies” (John 13:2 EASY). Judas, himself no picture of faith, opened the door of his thoughts to Satan.

When Ananias and Sapphira deceived the apostles, Peter said, “Ananias, why did you let Satan *rule your thoughts* to lie to the Holy Spirit?” (Acts 5:3 NCV).

The classic example of the devil's influence occurred in the garden of Eden. According to Paul, Satan seduced Eve by hijacking her thoughts. "I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, *your thoughts will be led astray* from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3 ESV).

There it is. Satan implanted a virus in Eve's mental software. He commandeered her mind by infecting her thoughts. He uses the same playbook today. "[The devil] was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44 ESV).

Satan aims to derail our thinking with unruly and ungodly thoughts. When our thinking goes off track, so does our life. Hence Paul's challenge: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould" (Rom. 12:2 PHILLIPS).

No one wants to be squeezed, right? By the power of Jesus, you can avoid being *conformed* and, instead, be "*transformed* by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2 ESV).

What a choice word! Paul, writing in the Greek language, chose the verb *metamorphoo*, from which we translate the noun *metamorphosis*. Anyone who paid attention in middle school science class remembers that the process of turning a caterpillar into a butterfly is called metamorphosis. The squirmy, furry worm is transformed into a winged, colorful, high-flying butterfly.

God promises you an even greater transformation.

Stuck in your head? Ticked off at the world? On edge like DEFCON 1? There is hope! The thoughts that have characterized your past need not characterize the rest of your life. God will move you from worm to butterfly, from clay-like to Christlike.

The second half of the scripture "be transformed by the renewal of your mind" is in the passive voice, meaning that God does the work! A new mind is less the result of human effort and more the result of divine

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intervention. *He* renews our minds. He reroutes our thought patterns. He rewires our synaptic circuitry. He tweaks our attitudes. He creates a new way of thinking. Heaven marshals its finest forces to help us.

As Paul stated, “Let God re-mould your minds from within” (Rom. 12:2 PHILLIPS).

Could there be a greater promise to ponder? Could there be a greater time to ponder it?

OUR STINKING THINKING

Our thoughts have gone down the tube! The numbers will stagger you. According to one study, 42 percent of high school students “experienced persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness.” And 22 percent have “seriously considered attempting suicide.”³

Feel the full force of those statistics. Imagine yourself sitting in a restaurant. Ten teenagers walk in. They carry phones and backpacks. But, according to this survey, they carry much, much more. Four of them buckle beneath feelings of despair. Two of the ten have given thought to killing themselves. Unspeakably tragic. Adolescence should be a time of dreams and fun, but for many young people it is a swampland of fog and fear.

And adults? We don't fare much better. One in five reported symptoms of anxiety and depression.⁴

Mental health problems impact every element of life. People who battle depression are 40 percent more likely to have cardiovascular issues. Of those who struggle with mental health, one-third experience substance abuse. High school students who struggle with depression are more than twice as likely to drop out of school and three times more likely to repeat a grade.⁵ Studies reveal that “75 percent to 98 percent of mental, physical, and behavioral illness comes from one's thought life.”⁶ Stinking thinking is sucking the life out of us.

One study found that fear, anger, and frustration cause the DNA to tighten up and become shorter, switching off genetic codes. Conversely, the health of those codes was improved by feelings of love, gratitude, and joy. HIV patients who have positive thoughts and feelings are three hundred thousand times (!) more resistant to the disease than those whose thoughts are negative.⁷

Thoughts. We cannot see them. We cannot buy them. We cannot always predict them. But we cannot deny this about them: They define our lives. Think well, live well. Think poorly, live poorly.

It's no wonder that God urges us to "be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts" (Prov. 4:23 GNT). He has not left us alone in this battle of the mind. God loves us too much to let us lead a life marked by poor thinking. He made our brains. He can retrain our brains.

Full disclosure: I am a Christian. You've likely picked up on the fact that I embrace and cherish a Christian worldview. Namely, God made us, saves us, pastors us, and is coming back for us. I love being a Christian. I truly do. Thanks to Jesus, life makes sense, has purpose, and is a lot of fun. The promise of heaven thrills me, and the assurance of God's love sustains me.

This book is rooted in Christian hope. If you are not a Christian, I hope you'll read it anyway. I hope you'll consider this idea: The secret sauce for thought management is a genuine faith in the God of the Bible.

THE HELMET OF SALVATION

God invites us to don "the helmet of salvation" (Eph. 6:17).

In the act of salvation, he wraps himself like a helmet around our heads. He declares to the enemy, the devil: "This mind is mine. I saved it. I own it. I am renewing it." In fact, one paraphrase of Paul's words invites us to "embrace the power of salvation's full deliverance, like a helmet to protect your thoughts from lies" (Eph. 6:18 TPT).

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Paul's original audience was well acquainted with the Roman helmet. It was a leather cap with a strap. Metal reinforced it. The helmet was essential to the survival of the soldier. His opponent carried a short-handled axe called a battle-axe. If the soldier went to battle without a helmet, his head would roll. If we go into the daily battle of life without ours, something equally serious will happen.

I can testify to the importance of a helmet. I love to ride my bike. I'm not a fan of biking on a busy road. A two-wheeler stands no chance against a truck. But I feel safe on the empty blacktops of the South Texas Hill Country where I live.

Even so, I still wear my helmet. Here is why. On one occasion I pedaled to the side of the road to take a break. When I did, I hit a patch of gravel, and my wheels slipped. Since my shoes were clipped in, I couldn't remove them fast enough to keep from falling. I fell, and fell hard, right on my head. I saw stars. I saw flashing lights. I think I saw Jesus. Once I caught my breath, I pulled myself up, removed my helmet and examined it. It was deeply dented. Had I been helmetless, I would have been knocked out.

It's a dangerous thing to ride a bike without wearing a helmet.

It's far more dangerous to go through life without the helmet of salvation. Yet, most people do exactly that. They wear no supernatural protection. When they slip and stumble, when life slips out from under them, they get hurt.

Please don't be among them. Don't go into battle without your armor.

How does one acquire this helmet? Simple: Ask for it. The gift of salvation is yours to receive. Turn your heart toward Jesus in prayer. Tell him you are a sinner in need of a Savior and he will gladly and immediately receive you into his family. It really is that simple—and marvelous.

Once he saves you, God enrolls you in his mental training course. Stinking thinking is a spiritual problem and requires a spiritual solution. God provides it!

If he can resurrect the dead, can he not resurrect hope? Defy depression? Clarify confusion? Flush out shame? Destroy doubt? Overcome insecurity? Download discipline? Eliminate lust? Banish bitterness? Take God at his word: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a *sound mind*” (2 Tim. 1:7 NKJV). He will perform a butterfly miracle in you. He will renovate your thought life. No more caterpillar crawling through the dirt—it’s time to receive your new wings.

But how does he do this? What choices can we make to help facilitate the change?

Search “thought management” on the internet, and you will find a Pacific Ocean of answers. Magazine articles, TED Talks, podcasts, blogs, and books. They explore meditation, medication, and transcranial magnetic stimulation. Better your brain by running more, eating right, sleeping longer, taking supplements, reading Lucado books. (Who added that last one?)

There’s a lot to wade through. I seek neither to promote nor debunk these treatments. I prefer to focus on three tools, an ancient trio of strategies that I know well and I know work well. Call them what you wish: *Thought management 101*. *Your mental tool kit*. *Mental floss*. However you tag them, they make a difference—a huge difference.

TAME YOUR THOUGHTS TOOL KIT



PRACTICE PICKY THINKING

Guard your thoughts.



IDENTIFY UFOS

An **Untruth** creates a **False** narrative that leads to an **Overreaction**.



UPROOT AND REPLANT

Weed out your most unhealthy thought patterns and replace them with divine truth.

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These tools will empower you to think clearly and rightly. Sometimes all three are needed. At other times just one or two will suffice. Either way, these tools will rescue you from the quicksand of ungovernable thoughts.

After exploring the tools in section 1, we will put them into practice in section 2. We will delve into the most common thought problems: anxiety, guilt, rejection, lust, and others. The list is not exhaustive but is exemplary of the types of mental marsh that can pull us under.

The big news is this: You have a choice. Your parents don't control your thoughts; you do. Your ancestry doesn't dictate your attitudes, you do. The weather may tell you what to wear, but you and only you tell yourself what to think about the weather. Mind management is God's gift to you. But the gift means nothing until you use it.

We all nod in agreement at this maxim: *You can't help a person who doesn't want to be helped.* But what do we mean when we say that?

Suppose a person is a classic worst-case-scenario personality. Suppose that person is you. Your glass is not only half empty but also broken into a thousand pieces and never to be refilled. Your self-assigned job description is to point out the inevitable casualties and catastrophes in life. People cringe when they see you, the congenital pessimist, coming. It's just a matter of time before you disgorge your negativity, and they know it.

No number of pep talks and lectures will change you. No matter how many times your straight-talking friends tell you that you are a real pain, nothing is going to happen until you decide, really decide, to change.

The moment you choose to change, however, change begins to happen! The moment you act, the benefits of that action commence. As one professor of neurology wrote:

The mere act of making an effort can do wonders. . . . Clinically depressed people feel significantly better simply by scheduling a first

appointment to see a therapist—it means they’ve recognized there’s a problem, it means they’ve fought their way up through the psychomotor quagmire to actually do something, it means they’ve turned a corner.⁸

The fact that you are holding this book says something. The fact that you’ve read this far says even more. Thanks for sticking with me. Before we go further, can we be clear on something? No one can help a person who resists help. Our Maker wired us in such a way that healing happens when we seek it. This is as good a time as any to ask, *Do you?* Do you want it?

You will discover how to

- interrupt self-sabotage and self-doubt,
- let go of anxiety and tap into God’s peace,
- snap the spiderweb strands of unpleasant impulses,
- disarm negative thoughts before they explode,
- defuse guilt and embrace grace,
- break free of self-critical thought loops and doubt, and
- relish the energizing truth of God’s love.

In short, you will learn how to tame your thoughts. No matter who you are. No matter what you have done. No matter if you are filthy rich or dirt poor. No matter if you are in therapy, incarcerated, or in a penthouse. Married or single. Old or young.

Progress is possible. I believe that with all my heart. I also believe that progress might require professional help. If that’s the case for you, please seek it.

With God as your helper, you will discover a new way of thinking. Those whirlpools of gloom and doom? He will stop them. That unhappy habit of craving what is not yours? God can fix that. Your tendency to mislabel yourself with words God doesn’t use about you? I am thrilled to say, those days are numbered.

*This book has a
simple yet lofty goal:
a life made better
by better thoughts.*

Think About What You Think About

A new you is about to emerge.

We are not the victims of our thoughts. We can be transformed, not conformed. We can find protection by wearing God's helmet of salvation. We can use our tool kit and learn to tame our thoughts—all seventy thousand of them!

Let's get going.