

You Are Not Your Thoughts

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You are not your thoughts. Philosophers have been telling us this for centuries. In our modern era, the idea has been often overlooked. Even if acknowledged intellectually, the idea that you aren't identical to every last thought that occurs to you is difficult to internalize. Our thoughts seem like our reality. They seem like who we are.

White Bears

Daniel Wegner is a Harvard psychologist who did an experiment published in 1987. The experiment is often referred to as the [“White Bears”](#) experiment. Wegner found that if you try to think about something, you think about it less. If you try not to think about something, you think about it more. Wegner called this the **“ironic effect.”**

Anxiety is a Psychological Reflex

We all need anxiety to survive. Although anxiety is a basic survival feeling, we hate it and do anything to avoid it. One strategy of dealing with anxiety is suppressing anxious thoughts. Well guess what? The more you try to suppress anxiety, the worse it gets.

Anxiety is a psychological reflex. Like any reflex, the more anxiety manifests itself, the more it becomes ingrained. An athlete improves his or her reflexes by exercising them with repetition, making them stronger and more automatic. In the same way, the brain becomes adept in imbedding anxiety. As you age, unaddressed anxiety ALWAYS get worse. So what do you do?

Negating the “Ironic Effect”

Neurological pathways are created by associating thoughts with:

- Other thoughts
- Physical sensations
- Emotions
- External events

Dr. Wegner points out the solution in an essay, [“The Seed of Our Undoing.”](#) Simply writing down or saying negative, and often unspeakable, thoughts negates this process. It is also effective to say the thoughts aloud in a quiet room. Writing down negative thoughts is the one tool that inadvertently pulled me out of a serious tailspin.

Detaching from Your Thoughts

So let's try the writing exercise. Get out a piece of paper and a pen; write down any of your negative thoughts. When you've written them all out, destroy the paper. Do this right now. I'll wait.

Done? Great. By writing the unspeakable thoughts on paper, you have created a space between you and the piece of paper.

- You have also connected yourself to the **separation** of those thoughts with vision and feel.

- Connecting the **space** between you and these thoughts with physical sensations creates new neurological pathways.
- With repetition, this separation from your thoughts becomes your new reality.

Writing down negative thoughts and immediately discarding them should be a practice that every human being should do on a regular basis from the time they can write.

- The writing exercise isn't just a psychological trick.
- It takes advantage of the way your nervous system works.
- Negative thinking is universal, and no human escapes it.
- Trying to will yourself in control of your thoughts won't work.

When you commit to writing, throwing the paper away allows you to write with complete freedom. The more negative the thoughts, the more effective the process is. Consider this a task you would do regularly like brushing your teeth. Consider it to be your "mental hygiene."

—Dr. David Hanscom