

Unexamined Beliefs at the Root of Stress

C. Uhl

Everywhere I go these days I hear people complaining about how stressed they are while failing to see that the major stressor in our lives is our own thinking. That's right: It is not what actually happens in the world that causes our stress so much as our thinking about what happens. If you doubt this, take note the next time you are experiencing stress and you will discover that just prior to your stress, there was a thought. You chose to believe that thought and that is what caused your stress. Here are three examples.

Case 1: You experience a wave of stress because someone is voicing an opinion which you judge as wrong. In this case, the other person isn't causing your stress; rather, your stress is the result of your rigid attachment to *your* particular thoughts and opinions.

Case 2: You take your child to the supermarket and he starts crying inconsolably. Here, too, it is not your child's fussing per se that is causing your stress so much as your conditioned belief that children should not fuss in public, and, if they do, that this reflects poorly on you.

Case 3: You are at school and your teacher hands back your exam; your grade is an "F". Your stomach goes into a knot and immediately you create a story that goes something like this: I am going to fail this course; I won't be able to get a job; I'll be destitute for the rest of my life. Here, again, it is your thinking—your story—that is causing your stress. Indeed, you could, as easily, choose to believe that failing this exam is a blessing, revealing to you that you have no interest in learning this subject. That's good to know. After all, why would you want to spend your life energy learning something that you didn't care about. Choose to believe this new story and, poof, no more stress!

If you are still struggling with this idea that it is your thinking that causes your daily stresses much more than what is actually happening, try the following experiment. Allow saliva to collect in your mouth and spit it into a clean glass. Then, pick up the glass and sip some of your "spit" back into your mouth. Most people find this revolting. But why? You are simply reintroducing, back into your mouth, a liquid that was just there, seconds earlier. What's the problem? The revulsion has to do with the word, "spit." Growing up we absorbed the culturally-transmitted belief that spit is revolting. It is this unconscious "belief," seeded deep inside us, that creates the stress, not the act of drinking your spit.

The point of all this is to, first, note when we feel stress; and, then, to identify the thought or belief causing our stress; and, finally, to simply ask: Is this really true? Once we recognize that beliefs are only opinions, we can take the next step and ask: "Could I let go of this belief?" We might even go further and choose new thoughts and beliefs that create feelings of peace and wellbeing, rather than stress.

In his book, [A New Earth](#), the spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle offers a simple exercise to allow a firsthand experience of what happens when we ventilate our thinking in this way. You can do it right now. Simply grab onto your chair with both hands. Clutch it with all your might, imagining that a fierce wind is blowing. As you cling to your chair, consider that this is how you hold onto your beliefs and opinions—i.e., as if your life depended on them. Note how

exhausting and stressful this is. Now, when you can stand it no more, let go of your grip on your chair and notice the release of tension and the lightness and ease in your body. This is what can happen if we take the time to first notice and, then, let go of the many debilitating beliefs that lie at the root of our stress-filled lives.