

Welcome to Quiet Courage – June 2004

The online newsletter for navigating life's changes and transitions from Bailey Coaching and Mary Ann Bailey, MC.

Feature Article: The Power of Our Thoughts

It has been estimated that the human mind processes 60,000 thoughts a day. Although this is an amazing statistic, I would love to know how many of those 60,000 thoughts actually move us forward in our lives and how many hold us back. I would venture to say that a majority of them do much more to hinder us than to help us.

I coach people who are going through life and career transitions. My clients are the courageous people who have intentionally decided to step outside their comfort zone and change something in their life that is not working as well as they would like. It can be daunting work because they are letting go of the familiar to grab on to something new, which is yet unknown to them.

There can be many obstacles along the path of making a life change. Some are relatively easy to navigate such as clarifying your specific goals and putting action steps into place to make sure you achieve what you want. Others can be more difficult.

One of the biggest obstacles my clients face during a transition is self-defeating thoughts. You know the ones I mean – the thoughts that remind us that we are not smart enough, we don't work hard enough, we should be more successful, and that we're being irresponsible, thoughtless, and/or selfish. These are the thoughts that are so often preceded by a "should", and keep us focused on what we think is the acceptable and right thing to be doing, versus what it is that we truly want to be doing.

These thoughts can be incredibly powerful and you may have noticed that the closer you move towards making a change in your life, the louder they get. If you give up, or back down, the voices appear to lessen in intensity. That is why many people throw in the towel before reaching their goal. They can't tolerate the fear, discomfort, and anxiety that these thoughts produce. Unfortunately, that leaves them living a life that is less than ideal and always wondering what would have happened if...

So, what can we do to lessen the hold these thoughts have on our lives? The first step is to become aware of just how prevalent these kinds of thoughts are in our minds. We have all been very conditioned to negative self-talk. It has become second nature to us, so it will take some time for us to actually recognize how often we do judge and criticize ourselves.

A good place to start is to notice the language you use when you talk about yourself or to yourself. How often do you use negative or judgmental words or how often is there harshness to your tone? Is this really truly how you feel about yourself? See how it feels to introduce kinder words and a softer tone into your language.

Be gentle with yourself as you do this exercise. Try not to fall into the easy trap of becoming more critical of yourself for being judgmental.

The next thing to pay attention to is how much validity you give your thoughts. In reality, thoughts are just thoughts. It is only when we start to believe them and attach meaning to them that we get into trouble. So, when you notice yourself having a self-critical thought, challenge its validity. How do we know that it is the honest truth? Just because we have been conditioned to believe it does not make it true.

Susan is a very talented artist. She always dreamed about making her art her life work, but she was raised with the beliefs that art was a hobby and to be a responsible person, one had

to have a "real" job. Susan worked in the "real" world for years, doing her art on the side. Although she was good at her job, she never stopped thinking about being a full time artist. Yet, her beliefs about what it meant to be responsible kept holding her back from going for her dream.

After battling her thoughts about what she thought she "should" do and what she knew she wanted to do, Susan finally took a leap of faith to follow her heart. She quit her job, moved her family to a quiet place in the country and began painting full time. She and her family love the slower paced life style of the country, and Susan has been very successful in selling her paintings in art shows throughout the area. She now describes herself as a happy, productive, and responsible member of her community.

What are some of your tightly held beliefs that you might want to challenge? Whose voice is telling you that you are not okay? If you can identify the source, give the statement back to that person and replace it with a statement of your own that speaks from your heart and that validates who you know yourself to be.

Lastly, I have found it sometimes helpful to use a little trick to help lessen the intensity of your thoughts when you find them just too overwhelming. What I do is visualize a radio. When the voices get too loud, I visualize myself turning down the volume dial. A friend of mine visualizes her thoughts as balloons; and depending on her mood, she will either pop the balloons or just let them fly away.

It doesn't really matter what your gimmick is. The point is to do something that reminds you that you are separate from your thoughts. Remember, thoughts only have the power we give them. We can't control what thoughts enter our minds, but we can control whether we let them dictate our life, or whether we just let them go. We only have one go at this life. Wouldn't it be more fun to live it the way we know in our hearts feels right for us, instead of how everyone else thinks we should?

Until next time, all the best,
Mary Ann Bailey, MC

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www.baileycoaching.com
maryann@baileycoaching.com