

A Public Service Column for Members: A Look At Wellness



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Overcoming Irrational Thoughts

Anger, anxiety, guilt, regret and worry are all perfectly normal emotions. They are our mind's way of telling us that something is wrong and we need to get off our keesters to fix it. As I have said many times before, we only have a limited amount of energy to stay healthy, age gracefully and live happily. It is up to you to choose how you spend that energy.

"Okay," you say, "that is great and all, but HOW do I choose to not be miserable?" Well, the first thing is to look at your irrational thoughts. Life is 10% reality and 90% what we make of it. Unfortunately, many people grow up learning irrational ways of thinking and negative ways of viewing the world.

Characteristics of Irrational Thoughts

- Irrational thoughts are inflexible or "must-abatory thinking" Things must be just so. There are very few things in life we **must** do. I am about as rigid and inflexible as they come, I have learned that flexibility makes life a whole lot easier.
 - Get a stack of index cards.
 - On each card, write down one thing you feel you "must" do. Low and behold, you will often find that there are not enough hours in an 8-day week to get it all done.
 - Prioritize the cards in order of what is the most important.
 - Flip the cards over and write modifications to make the "musts" more flexible. For example, one of my musts is exercising. Long ago I was very rigid about exercising between 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. every single morning and had a very strict routine of what I did. As I had children, got a job etc., I quickly stopped being able to adhere as rigidly to that "must." Other "musts" like caring for my kids and not getting fired moved up on the priority list. Nevertheless, I am a much nicer person if I get out my aggression at the gym, so on the back of the card, I would write alternatives like, workout at home, mow the lawn (a push mower and 2/3 of an acre gets out a lot of aggression), get up at 5 a.m. and go on a run etc. All these alternatives still let me accomplish the "must" of exercising, but provided me some flexibility.
- Irrational thoughts place unrealistic expectations on yourself or others and/or are non-self-accepting and/or fail to accept human fallibility. This one is harder, because most of us have difficulty identifying what "unrealistic" is. Further, what is unrealistic for you might not be unrealistic for me and vice versa. It is always helpful to ask someone else's opinion of what is "realistic." This goes for quantity and type of work as well as expectations for perfection. Life is much easier if you have realistic expectations of yourself and others and accept (and anticipate) that people make mistakes.
- Irrational thoughts demonstrate over-concern with others' opinion of yourself. If you find yourself getting all wrapped up in trying to get someone's approval, ask yourself, "Why do I need his/her approval?" Many times it is helpful to differentiate between "like" and "respect." Okay, ideally your boss and co-workers will like *and* respect you, but will it have a major impact on your life if they don't? If they respect your work and know you do a good job, do you really care if they want to be your friend? People who need to be needed and *must* be liked often are exhausted trying to please everyone else and forget to take care of themselves.

- Irrational thoughts also assume your authority or superiority over others. This reminds me of a joke, How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: Only one, but it has to want to change... HarHarHar... I have said it before and will say it again, you cannot change another person. If you get caught in the trap of thinking that someone will change for you, you will be disappointed. When people change for anyone else but themselves, the change is only short-lived. This type of thinking also leads to conflict with others who also see themselves as the center of the universe. Both of you cannot be the center of the universe and, chances are, neither one of you is right all the time. You may indeed be right. Some people may be stupid, nevertheless, sometimes we all have to be subordinate to people who are wrong or ignorant.
- Irrational thoughts assume a clear-cut difference between right and wrong and that you have the ability to always accurately differentiate between the two. In reality, there are few clear cut answers. I tell my patients that they need to evaluate their decisions based on head-heart and gut honesty. If your head, heart and gut all are okay with the decision, it is probably a good one. What does that mean? Well, ask yourself, does this seem to make sense (intellectual/head honesty), can I live with this decision (heart honesty) and does it feel right or turn my stomach (gut honesty).
- Irrational thoughts place you at the center of the universe. People get all upset when they make a mistake or say the wrong thing. Get over yourself! You are not going to be in control all of the time, and the things you do and say are not really that memorable. Even some of the biggest faux pas only get you ribbed for a few weeks. Then there is something new to grab people's attention.
- Irrational thoughts over-estimate your right to a trouble-free life and under-estimate your ability to cope with adversity. If you can view problems as challenges placed in your path to help you grow, it tends to take the edge off things. Many challenges are too great to cope with alone. The most effective people are able to realize when they need help or support from others.

Worry is energy tied up in the future, and regret/guilt is energy tied up in the past.

Anger is a defense that protects us from our six basic fears by trying to constantly remain in control and keep people at a distance so they cannot hurt or reject you.

Six basic fears: death, isolation, loss of control, failure, the unknown, rejection.

In sum, we all have irrational thoughts. When you start to feel angry, anxious or guilt-ridden, review the list above to see which statements best describe the thought patterns that are making you unhappy. Ask yourself: "What am I getting upset about?" "What thoughts/beliefs/self-talk do I have that are supporting my misery?" "Are these thoughts/beliefs/self-statements rational, productive *and* helpful?" If they are not, replace them with more realistic thoughts/beliefs/self-statements. Finally, remember that dwelling in negative emotions is just going to make you sick. Anger, anxiety and guilt are meant to make you take action, so get going! 🍎

Dr. Dawn-Elise Snipes has a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology with a specialty in Behavior Modification, a Master's Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling, and a Doctoral Degree in Counselor Education with a specialty in wellness in law enforcement and the emergency services. Dr. Snipes holds licenses and certifications as a Mental Health Counselor, Rehabilitation Counselor and Fitness Practitioner and belongs to the American Counseling Association and Chi Sigma Iota, the National Counseling Honor Society.

Currently Dr. Snipes serves as the Chief Executive Officer and Clinical Director for Dawn-Elise Enterprises, Inc. which has grown over the past few years to include three companies: Affordable Wellness, The Addictions Counseling Alliance and Police-Counseling.com. In addition to her private practice, she has worked for two years as the Clinical Director of a large multi-level substance abuse and mental health treatment facility in Gainesville, Florida.

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PBA wishes to express appreciation to Dr. Snipes for contributing this helpful column for the benefit of our members.



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