

The Mental Aspect of Healing: What You Think Can Hurt You

When seriously or chronically ill, or otherwise going through a rough patch, our mind can be our best friend or our worst enemy. That is because we constantly filter our experience through our interpretation of what is happening to us, and our interpretation is itself based on memories of past experiences, what we've been told by parents, friends, the media, etc. There is nothing inherently wrong with "interpretation" per se; we rely on our judgments constantly to guide us through our lives, plan for the future, decide how best to spend our time, and so on.

In fact, thinking is as natural as breathing to a human being, so we needn't suppress it, which is impossible anyway. However, the problem arises when we confuse our thought process for reality, instead of seeing it as an interpretation. When we do that, when we confuse the reflection for the actual thing, we are no longer present in the moment and a little bit of our humanity is lost. We end up "living in our head", and gradually losing the ability to feel with our heart. "Why does this happen?", you might ask. It happens because the thought process occurs so quickly that we miss the initial act of perception that precedes it.

For example, we awaken in the morning and we notice it's raining outside and we immediately think to ourselves. "What a nasty day". This value judgment can then color our whole day with a negative slant, leading to being in a bad mood, testiness, feeling out of sorts and so on. The problem is that we confuse our initial perception of the weather for our interpretation of the weather, e.g. "nasty day", and this happens countless times each hour, one interpretation piling upon the next without us quite being aware that these are simply thoughts.

In other words, we are driven by our own thought process to experience the world through the filter of our biases. We skip over the moment of pure perception that occurs each fraction of a second, and conclude mistakenly that our conception (interpretation) IS our perception. Not only is this harmful to ourself and others because our biases often miss the point, but we rob ourselves of the simple joy of being alive with our senses awake and operating as they were intended to do. Perhaps as you are reading this, you may very well nod to yourself and acknowledge that this rings true, but understanding it intellectually is not quite the same nor as powerful as slowing the mind down and witnessing this process up close and personal. More on that in a second.

What does all this have to with Unconditional Healing? Well, the process that I just described often becomes significantly amplified when we are ill or otherwise going through a difficult time. It becomes exacerbated because the extreme nature of our situation ramps up our reactions, makes us more fearful, and in general forces us out of our comfort zone. Our heightened anxiety then activates our thought process even more than usual in order to protect ourselves from feeling groundless and uncertain. In other words, we use our thoughts as a protective device from feeling what we actually feel. In reality, our illness and what we think about it are two separate things. But if we confuse the interpretation for the reality, if we take our thoughts as gospel, the result can be devastating, leaving us feeling hopeless and helpless.

It's one thing to interpret a rainstorm as "it's a nasty day", it's quite another to be stuck in an interpretation of "woe is me" or "I've only myself to blame" when one has cancer. In that state of mind, it's very hard to make informed decisions about what to do next, or even function in some cases. Often, we become numb or emotionally paralyzed, "frozen in place".

This very much speaks to the mental aspect of healing, where we gradually make friends with and train ourselves to slow down our minds by setting aside time to just sit and feel what is happening without judgment. To just be. Usually this is done on a cushion or a chair for a few minutes each day, gradually working up to 20 minutes at a time. We use the breath as our main focus of grounding us in the present moment, but we could also sit outside in nature and listen to the rustling of leaves and feel the breeze on our face.

Gradually, if we can practice mindfulness regularly, our thought process slows down and becomes less of the focus. We start to notice how we feel before, and even during the inevitable interpretations that arise. This opens up a whole new world of accommodation and fundamental healthiness to us, as our sense of ourselves broadens and deepens. We feel less restricted and trapped in a narrow self-created prison of our own device. Even if we are ill, we feel more alive as our senses awaken and activate. The important thing is to become more curious about how our mind works and to remember that interpretation always follows experience, but is never the same as feeling the actual experience.