

Replacing Toxic Thoughts

Our thoughts are the most important thing about us. Yet, we can spend a great deal of time unaware of our thoughts and the tangled feelings that go with them. Take a moment to think about that: I am often unaware of, much less actively guiding the most important thing about me. This in itself can be a disturbing thought. But it doesn't have to be that way. In fact, God doesn't want our lives to be that way. He wants something much, much better for us. He tells us to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:15). But in order to take every thought captive I am going to need to be aware of my thoughts and feelings. Once I become aware of my negative, toxic thoughts, I can give consideration to replacement thoughts.

Replacement thoughts are both important and challenging. It is critical that they come from the heart of God and not ourselves. Allow this to be an ongoing process. Continue to bring ideas for replacement thoughts before God for insight. Consider asking Godly friends for input on replacement thoughts. Wrong replacement thoughts may not be helpful and can be harmful to our freedom in Christ.

In my own life, one of the toxic thoughts I am working on replacing is thinking negatively or critically about others. One knee jerk reaction for replacing that type of thought might be to replace a negative thought about someone with a positive thought instead. However, I found that for myself, that has not been helpful. In fact in some ways, it fuels my problem. I believe my critical thoughts often come from a desire to see myself as better. Seeing myself as better (or worse) is a competitive mind set, trying to get value from how I think I stack up against other people. I found healthier replacement thoughts started with releasing my need to get

significance from comparisons. Instead, I look to God for my significance, his love for me and acceptance of me. At first this was more cognitive in nature. But over time, I started to experience the thoughts at a deeper level of belief. Now my life is freer and more content as I keep working toward the new healthy thoughts.

This takes some serious training. One way to train ourselves is to catch our thoughts unawares, so to speak. To experiment with this, try setting a timer at some point when you are occupied with other activities in life. You may find this more challenging than you expect. It can be surprisingly difficult to identify what we are thinking and feeling, especially at the deepest level. One signal that you are having toxic thoughts is when you notice negative emotions. You can use those negative emotions as a red flag for toxic thoughts. Invite the Holy Spirit in and stay strong in God's strength, encouraging and inviting the truth.

Practice this while working on other tasks:

For a period of say an hour while you are engaged in any tasks or work, set a timer for every 10-15 minutes. When the timer goes off, pause whatever you are doing to examine and write down your thoughts and feelings using the chart on the next page.

Practice this during a meal:

Another way to practice this is during a meal. If you are eating with others, invite them to join the exercise. Otherwise do this at a meal when you are alone. Set a timer to go off every five minutes. At that time, stop eating and record your thoughts and feelings and any ideas you may have for replacement thoughts when you have unhealthy or toxic thoughts. When you are finished journaling that thought, go on with your meal. Continue this process until your meal is complete. If you have thoughts and

feelings you notice in between the timers, you can write those down too. What does God want to show you about your thoughts?

2 Cor.10:5 ...we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

| Thoughts | Feelings | Possible Replacement Thoughts |
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Consider these suggestions for replacing toxic thoughts:

- As you identify the toxic thought, you immediately, prayerfully, and consciously think of your replacement thought.
- Reflect on the positive replacement thought. Don't dwell on the negative because it will grow. Focus on what you are replacing the negative with.
- Actively replace your toxic thoughts with positive ones throughout the day.

- Journal and pray through any reflections after the experience.

- What trends do you notice in your thoughts? What do you think God would like you to see? Invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you about this.

- What thoughts and feelings might need replacing? What are some possible replacement thoughts? Invite the Holy Spirit to guide you in this. Whether you experienced toxic thoughts or not, ask God to help keep you on alert for them as they pop up later.

- What remaining questions do you have about your toxic thoughts and replacement thoughts? Bring these to God; ask him to guide you in this now and in the future.