Stuck in a Thought Loop? Here’s What Actually Helps

7 MIN READ

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BY HEATHER HURLOCK

UCLA neuroscience explains why labeling a thought softens it. Here's what that looks like in practice.

When I first started meditating, I thought I was supposed to stop thinking. I remember asking my teacher, *what if I have a great thought when I'm meditating? Can I stop and write it down?* I'll never forget his response: *Don't throw the baby out with the bath water.* To which I thought: *Which is the baby? Which is the bathwater?* Those trickster Buddhists.

It took me a while to understand what he meant: that the thinking isn't the problem. The problem is warring with your own mind.

There's a question that can come up the more you practice meditation. *Why do some thoughts keep coming back?* The same worry. The same self-criticism. The same loop. Noticing helps. Naming helps too. But sometimes a thought has weight, and the practices that work for everyday mind-wandering (notice and return to the breath) don't always help.

This piece is about what to do when a thought won't let go.

A note before we go further: I like to remind people that **mindfulness begins in the body**. That's where presence exists. And when we're steady in our bodies, we can turn our attention skills towards our thoughts. What we practice in the body, we can also practice in the mind.

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The Awareness That Recognizes the Thought

A few months ago, I wrote about why **you don’t have to clear your mind to meditate**. In my meditation teacher training, Tara Brach said something that’s stayed with me: *there’s an awareness larger than the thoughts that recognizes the thoughts.*

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I’ve sat with that line for a while. That’s the awareness we’re cultivating when we practice meditation. Not the absence of thinking. The presence that can acknowledge the thinking. This is a human capacity. We all have access to it.

It’s also something researchers have been studying for decades. They call it decentering, the capacity to shift perspective from being inside your experience to

observing it. In a **2015 paper in *Perspectives on Psychological Science***, researchers at the University of Haifa and Kent State proposed that decentering reflects three interrelated processes:

1. Meta-awareness = noticing the thinking is happening
2. Disidentification from internal experience = recognizing *I am having a thought* rather than *I am the thought*
3. Reduced reactivity to thought content = not believing or acting on every thought that arises

Mindfulness, the researchers note, isn't about producing some special state. It's about cultivating these three capacities, which underlie the mental-health benefits of mindfulness practice.

In other words: the awareness that notices the thought is real, it's measurable, and it's the thing the practice is actually building.

How This Shows Up Off the Cushion

I'm an artist. A musician. We've all heard the trope of the struggling artist, and most people assume the struggle is about making a living, which is fair, especially in this day and age. But the real struggle of the artist is staying true to the work. Staying close to your actual perspective, not the thoughts and narratives about your perspective. That thing you're trying to channel from deep within that feels true.

And this is true for everyone, even those of you who might not call yourself artists. But cooking is an art, medicine is an art, welding, dancing, writing, singing, friendships and workout routines can be art. We're all artists. And we've all had that moment when thoughts take over.

You know the ones: *This isn't good enough. I'm not doing this right. Someone's already done this. I'm wasting my time.* Those are thoughts. They can feel like truth,

but they’re not. They’re weather. And if we mistake them for the sky, we stop doing the work.

This is why mindfulness of thoughts matters far beyond the cushion. Once we can recognize a self-critical thought as a thought, not a verdict, we can let it pass through and return to whatever is true for us. The song. The painting. The meal. The garden. The way we care for the people in our lives. The work. This world tells us art is for the few, for the young, for the gifted, for whoever has earned the leisure to take it up. But making something true with your hands, your voice, the way you raise children, the way you tend to friendships, that’s all art. It’s essentially human to make things. The practice of mindfulness of thoughts is, in part, the practice of clearing enough space inside us to hear what wants to come alive through us.

Jack Kornfield and Tara Brach, my meditation teachers, quote one of their own teachers often: *the mind creates the abyss, and the heart crosses it.* Our thoughts construct the gap. But it’s not our mind or thinking that gets us across. It’s our heart.

How to Practice: Notice, Name, Inquire

The basics are simple. We notice. We touch in lightly. We let thoughts pass like weather.

When we find ourselves coming back to the same thought, the same worry, the same self-criticism, the same loop, it can help to name it. *Worrying. Judging. Planning. Comparing.* We’re not pushing the thought away. We’re acknowledging: this is what’s here.

This step has more behind it than spiritual lineage. In a **now-classic 2007 fMRI study at UCLA** published in *Psychological Science*, psychologist Matthew Lieberman and his team showed people negative emotional images. When people simply labeled the emotion they were seeing (anger, fear), activity in the amygdala, the brain’s threat-alarm center, decreased. Activity in the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, a region associated with regulating emotion, increased. Lieberman has

compared what's happening to hitting the brake when you see a yellow light. Naming the thought or feeling is, neurologically, an act of regulation. The act itself softens what it names.

Most of the time, in the simple act of acknowledging, the thought softens. Sometimes it dissolves on its own. But not always.

Some thoughts have weight. They keep coming back, they have a charge, they feel like truth. Researchers call this **rumination**, and the evidence is striking. The late Yale psychologist Susan Nolen-Hoeksema spent her career mapping how repetitive negative thinking predicts the onset of depression, exacerbates negative thinking itself, impairs problem-solving, and erodes social support.

When we find ourselves in a thought loop that won't ease up, it can be helpful to move from naming into inquiry. We get curious and kind. *What am I believing right now? Is this really true? What does it feel like in my body to believe this? What does this part of me need?*

Inquiry is the practice of bringing kind attention to a thought that feels sticky. We're not trying to argue it away or solve it. We're trying to understand what's surfacing. Underneath most repetitive thoughts is a tender, sometimes very young (and by that I mean very old) place inside us that's asking for care. When that place gets the attention it's been asking for, the thought it's been generating starts to lose its grip. Not because we forced it to. Because we created space for it to exist without attaching to it. Sometimes we need help with this, and that's what therapy is for. We don't have to do this work alone.

The Words We Think Build the World We Live In

And here's where the practice gets bigger than what happens on the cushion. Mindfulness of thoughts isn't just personal work. It's collective work too.

bell hooks wrote something I return to often, in her book *Belonging: A Culture of Place.* She wrote: *I dreamed about a culture of belonging. I still dream that dream. I contemplate what our lives would be like if we knew how to cultivate awareness, to live mindfully, peacefully; if we learned habits of being that would bring us closer together, that would help us build beloved community.*

Mindfulness is a pathway there. It starts with our own thoughts. When we cultivate awareness, allowing thoughts to be what they are, returning to one breath, this body, this moment, we're creating space for possibility. What we practice becomes how we live. The thoughts we think become the world we build, within us, between us, around us.

Bring kind curiosity to your own thoughts. Not to fix them. To meet them where they are. Name them. Put them down. Feel the space around them.

Let your thoughts come. Let them go. And remember: there's an awareness larger than the thoughts that recognizes the thoughts. That awareness is who you truly are. It's who we are.

A Practice You Can Do Right Now

If you want to feel what this is like in your own body and mind, I made you a guided practice. It's an adaptation of a mindfulness of thoughts meditation from my **teacher training course with Tara Brach and Jack Kornfield**. You don't need anything to do it. Just somewhere to sit, your breath, and a few minutes.

We'll start by settling the body, because that's where presence lands first. Then we'll rest attention on the breath as a place to come back to. From there, we'll let the field of awareness open to sensations, sounds, emotions, and eventually to thinking itself. When you notice you've been thinking, you'll practice softly naming it. *Planning. Worrying. Remembering.* Not pushing the thought away. Not following it down the road. Just noticing it's here, and returning to the breath.

Press play when you're ready.

LISTEN

Mindfulness of Thoughts: A Guided Meditation

By Heather Hurlock

When a thought keeps coming back, you'll practice inquiry: asking gently, *what am I feeling underneath this?*

There's no goal. No version of this you can do wrong. Each time you notice the mind has wandered and come back, that's the practice working.

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WRITTEN BY:



Heather Hurlock