

LEAP

with Dr. Gita Pensa



The Difference Between Thoughts and Feelings

One of the tools we discussed in our call was the “coaching model.” The coaching model is a tool derived from cognitive behavioral research and is used to help understand our thought patterns and how we can shift them to attain a goal. Below is a primer on the coaching model.

The model states that all aspects of our lives are categorized into five elements: circumstances, thoughts, feelings, actions, and results. Most of what we experience in this world can be categorized and understood within this framework.

Once we see how things are categorized, we can begin to understand how our interaction with each layer determines the results in our lives. How we *think* about things determines how we *feel* about things. How we *feel* about things determines *what we do or don't do*—our actions or inactions. And, of course, our actions (or lack thereof) create our results. The sum of these results then creates our lives.

It is often summed up as : “Change your thoughts, change your life.”

Here is how the five categories are defined:

Circumstances	Things that happen in the world that we cannot control—this includes our past. Circumstances are also facts. They are facts that <i>everyone</i> would agree upon at any given time. “This is a rock.” “This is a chair.” “It is raining.” “I weigh 150 pounds.” These are never subjective.
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Thoughts	Thoughts are just sentences that happen in your mind. Thoughts are <i>our interpretation</i> of facts or circumstances. Your brain creates them. They are what gives meaning to our <i>circumstances</i>. We have hundreds of thoughts throughout a day, even about one particular circumstance. “This rock is heavy.” “This chair is comfortable.” “The rain is ruining my day.” “I need to lose weight.” “I need to gain weight.” Thoughts can vary about a single fact, even for an individual person. Our thoughts are where we can have a lot of impact.
Feelings	Feelings are the emotions that we experience, caused by the thoughts we are thinking. Another way to think about feelings is that they are a sensation that we experience in our bodies (aka your blood boiling when you are angry, your stomach clenching, your heart pounding when scared.) Feelings are always created by a thought we are thinking. “I’m so happy it’s raining, because my flower garden needs it.” “I’m so proud that I’m 150 pounds, my resistance training is paying off!”
Actions	Actions are our behaviors, reaction or inaction. This is what we do, or don’t do, in the world. Actions are directly motivated by our feelings. <i>I keep exercising because I’m proud of my results.</i> <i>I quit exercising because I’m frustrated.</i> Actions also include inaction, such as avoiding certain people or things. They can be subtle, like a change in our tone of voice. They also include ruminating or catastrophizing with certain thoughts (actions in our heads)
Results	Results are what we see in the world and our lives as an effect of our actions or inactions. ‘I now weigh 155 pounds.’ <i>The result will always be evidence for the original thought.</i>



The focus for our homework this week is **identifying some of our thoughts and** feelings, and paying attention to them. The work of differentiating our circumstances, thoughts and feelings can be very challenging, because often they get jumbled into one category, but separating them out can be incredibly helpful.

For the purpose of our work together, we will use the words “circumstance” and “fact” interchangeably. Likewise we will use the words “story”, “thoughts”, and “truths” interchangeably.

This can be a little confusing at first because truths and facts are often used interchangeably in our common vernacular, but for this work they are not the same thing.

For example, it may be true to many of us in this course that medical school is challenging; it might be true for the majority of students. However there are some people out there who don't find medical school challenging. The subjectivity makes it a thought and not a circumstance. There are people who might also carry the thought that medical school is not challenging. A circumstance to medical school might be “it is a 4 year curriculum.” Even statements like “medical school is expensive” are not facts; they are subjective. The *fact* might be that medical school tuition at X school is 66,000 dollars per year. That is a *fact* (or *circumstance*) that everyone can agree on and prove. From that particular circumstance, we can create lots of *thoughts* like, “medical school is expensive”, “medical school is an investment”, etc.

When we can differentiate between our circumstances and our thoughts about our **circumstances, we can have a lot of power.** We often believe that our circumstances are the source of our problems, and if that is true, then we have to change our circumstances to solve the problem. Of course, there are many situations in which we cannot change the circumstances. When we differentiate between our circumstances, which are neutral, from our thoughts which are subjective and not neutral, we can identify the effect our thoughts are having. Ultimately it is our thoughts that cause our feelings, which in turn fuel the actions we take or don't take.

If we can separate our circumstances, thoughts, and feelings, we can create a lot of change in the way we move through a process.

This might all seem like a lot to take in, and that is normal. What we really want you to focus on for these two weeks is getting very clear on what feelings you are having, and the thoughts that might be the cause of those feelings. As you build this ability in yourself, the rest of it becomes easier to understand and move forward with.

So until you start the next section, please try and do the following exercises:

1. Become aware of your feelings such as anger, happiness, or annoyance, even in low stakes situations like having dinner with your family
2. Start paying attention to the thoughts you are having, and see if you can notice what feelings are being caused by those thoughts.