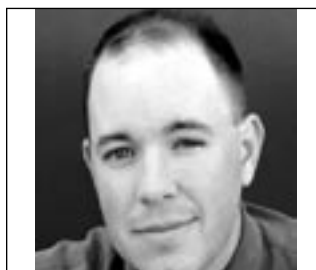


# HEALTH

## Don't always believe what you think

**YOU'RE NOT ALONE**



**DR. BRAD KLONTZ**

Clinical psychologist

Imagine yourself at a business meeting. Your boss introduces you to a new employee, named Mark. While you shake Mark's hand, you notice him look away. What you say to yourself about Mark's behavior will likely be automatic, and will determine how you feel about the encounter. If you say to yourself, "Mark is rude. He insulted me by not looking at me," you may feel angry. If you say to yourself, "Mark could tell I am uninteresting," you will likely feel dejected. If you say to yourself, "Mark must be nervous because it is his first day," you may feel compassion. How you act toward Mark will directly follow your thoughts and feelings. If you thought he was rude or he labeled you as boring, you might avoid him. If you thought he was feeling nervous, you might try to make him feel welcome.

Life provides us with a never ending supply of opportunities to create meaning. Things happen around us, to us, and within us. Some things seem unique to us, such as an injury, job loss, promotion, or divorce. Others are an inevitable part of life, such as aging, health concerns, and death. It is not what happens or doesn't happen to us that determine our mood and life satisfaction. Rather it is how we interpret those events, and what we decide they mean about ourselves, the world, and life itself. These internal decisions determine whether we are happy or sad, angry or joyful, appreciative or resentful. Then we act on how we feel.

Unfortunately, we give our thoughts way too much power. We rarely notice them, or challenge them, yet we let them create our experience in the world. Often they

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are inaccurate, only part of the story, unhelpful, or just one of many possible interpretations. Anyone who has been in a relationship knows there are often at least two different interpretations of the same event. Have you ever had a conversation with a loved one that went something like this:

"But that is not what happened."

"Yes it was."

"But that is not what I said!"

"Yes it was."

When these conversations happen, we are convinced that our way of seeing things is the correct way and our partner must be crazy for not seeing the "truth." Even though we participated in the same experience, two entirely different interpretations resulted, often with equal merit to an outside observer. Thus, actually, in this moment our partner is giving us the "gift" of an alternative perspective. With the constant running dialogue between our ears, we do not realize the benefit of someone challenging our thinking. This can lead us to automatically believing what we think, without examining sometimes more accurate or helpful alternatives. When we blindly accept our thoughts as "reality," we can become vulnerable to developing an unhealthy way of looking at the world. We can become overly pessimistic, excessively fearful, rigid, or unreasonably angry.

What we say to ourselves about ourselves, about what has happened to us, about others, and about the world, will determine our moods and behaviors. Research has shown consistent and predictable patterns of thinking in people suffering from anxiety and depression. For example, when our thoughts are chronically focused on self-criticism, negativity about the world, and hopelessness about the future, we will become depressed and we will be more vulnerable to relationship problems, sickness, and pre-

mature death.

Are your thoughts serving you well? If you suspect that your automatic thinking may be having a negative impact on your mood, relationships, outlook, or quality of life, consider spending some time thinking about your thinking. Pay attention to your inner dialogue. The next time you notice you are feeling anxious or down, ask yourself, "What is going through my mind right now?" Identify your self-talk and ask yourself: 1) What evidence is there to support this thought? 2) What evidence is there to refute it? 3) Is this way of thinking helping me get what I want? 4) Is there a more helpful way to look at this? 5) What is the worst thing that could happen? 6) What is most likely thing to happen? 7) If my friend had this thought, what would I tell him or her?

To a large degree, our thoughts determine our moods and behaviors. By becoming aware of our thoughts, evaluating them, and changing those thoughts that are inaccurate or unhelpful, we can begin to gain control over our moods and improve the quality of our lives. Most psychotherapists are trained to help people change the way they feel by examining and changing the way they think using an approach called cognitive-behavioral therapy. If you are experiencing difficulty with anxiety or depression, consider seeking professional help.

Dr. Brad Klontz is the president of the Hawaii Psychological Association and coauthor of *The Financial Wisdom of Ebenezer Scrooge and Facilitating Financial Health*. He can be reached by e-mail at "mailto:brad@klontzcoaching.com". For free, confidential referrals to a psychologist in your area, contact the HPA online at [www.hawaiipsych.org](http://www.hawaiipsych.org) or call (808) 521-8995.



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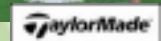
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