Years ago a Pogo comic strip became popular because it so accurately and succinctly described the human condition. Pogo declared, "We have met the enemy and they are us!"

Sadly, we are often our own worst enemies when we take into our beings the very ideas and beliefs that hurt us far more than help us. Psychological and psychiatric literature sometimes calls distortional thinking psychological reversal. It is a condition in which the patient says he wants to get well, but subconsciously he does not. Psychologists and psychiatrists have long known that some patients have self-defeating natures. They resist treatment in a variety of ways. They forget to take their prescribed medications or refuse to take them because they "don't like the aftertaste." They insist they are not responding to treatment even when their symptoms improve. They may stop a particular program of treatment just when it seems to be working for them.

REPLACING DISTORTIONAL THINKING WITH TRUTH

The reasons for self-sabotage are many and varied. One of the more obvious is the following:

"I Am My Disease"

Some individuals grow up with a disease or they have experienced the illness for such a long period of time that they form their personal identity around it. Their point of uniqueness is the disease or ailment they have. This was likely the case with Milt and Agnes. In individuals such as these, illness becomes their way of life. Milt did not see himself as Milt. He saw himself as Emphysema Milt. Such individuals do not perceive that they are people with normal lives who happen to get ill, but as ill people who do normal things that are all focused on a remote possibility they might become well.

In some ways, their illnesses become an exchange for jobs they hate, the drudgery of housework and other chores, and boring, loveless relationships. When you ask a person who has this form of distortional thinking, "What do you do for fun?" he often responds with a blank stare. The fact is, they don't have hobbies or careers. They don't have any pastimes other than talking about their ailment.

Any time you hear a person use such phrases as "my arthritis," "my chronic pain," or "my multiple sclerosis," you have a clue that the person has so adopted this ailment or disease that he is starting to identify himself inseparably with it.

The vast majority of these people who see themselves as infirmities also have infirm careers. In other words, they don't work. As contrasted with people who genuinely are disabled in some way or who are physically unable to work for a legitimate reason, they believe, either consciously or subconsciously, that their diseases entitle them to all forms
of charitable and government assistance. They see entitlement payments as a reward for having the illness.

They delight in perks they don't necessarily need or deserve, from the handicapped parking sticker to recognition as being part of a class-action lawsuit. Those who receive extra love, money, excitement, or esteem from their illness rarely have a strong desire or commitment to getting well.

Not long ago a woman came from Mexico to my office. She was loaded with toxic emotions. She came in carrying a suitcase filled with the vitamins and other supplements she was taking. She was livid at the cabdriver who had brought her from the airport to my office. When she began unloading on him the reason for her visit to the United States, he had replied, "Your problem is that you don't really want to get well." In my opinion, he had hit the nail on the head.

I spent a week helping this woman identify and change her distortional belief systems. By the time she left she reported feeling better. I hope those feelings lasted. She had been a bundle of negative life beliefs.

NEGATIVE LIFE BELIEFS

Dr. James Durlacher has written:

"Negative life beliefs generally come from some real or imagined remark, pronouncement or anything else said to, or overheard by, the person-usually coming from someone in authority. This authority is usually a parent but can be a relative, teacher, clergyman/woman, police officer, employer; employee, or anyone else whom the person regards as authoritative or knowledgeable."

When we are stressed, depressed, angry, anxious, or feeling guilty, we become more prone to misinterpreting events and to thinking in a distorted way. One distorted thought tends to lead to another and, before long, we are trapped in a downward spiral. We begin voicing negative statements such as:

- "Nothing ever goes right for me."
- "I just can't do anything right."
- "Everything I touch fails."

Two of the leading pioneers in this area are Dr. Albert Ellis and Dr. Aaron Beck. Dr. Ellis, a renowned psychologist in the 1950s, developed a form of psychotherapy called rational emotive therapy. Dr. Ellis believed that toxic emotions arise from three negative and incorrect beliefs:

- Wrong Belief #1: I must do well.
- Wrong Belief #2: You must treat me well.
- Wrong Belief #3: The world must be easy.
A sane, rational, and potentially positive person is someone who recognizes that nobody does well all the time. Everybody has faults, foibles, and flaws. The healthy perception is that people at times are not going to treat us well, and the world at times is not going to be easy.

In the 1960s Dr. Beck developed cognitive therapy, in which the patient learns to change his way of thinking and the way he interprets events. A significant part of the therapy involves changing the way a person talks.

In response to a negatively perceived situation, a person in cognitive therapy might be taught to say:

- "This didn't go well, but most of the time things do go well."
- "I may have made a mistake this time, but I can do lots of things well."
- "I may have failed in this, but overall I've enjoyed successes in my life."

One of the experts in cognitive therapy is Dr. David Burns, a renowned psychiatrist and author of the best-selling book *Feeling Good*. Dr. Burns has conducted more than thirty thousand cognitive therapy sessions in his career and he sees these principles as vital for a person to gain control over his own toxic beliefs and negative thinking patterns:

- Your thoughts create your moods. Cognition actually refers to beliefs, perceptions, and mental attitudes, and how you interpret events. These thoughts can create the emotions of anger, hostility, depression, sadness, anxiety, fear, shame, or guilt.
- When a person feels depressed, his thoughts are dominated by negativity.
- The negative thoughts linked to emotional turmoil nearly always contain major distortions. These distortions might also be called irrational, twisted, or unrealistic thought patterns.

Dr. Burns has identified ten types of negative beliefs:

1. **All-or-Nothing Thinking**
   The person who thinks this way sees everything in black-or-white terms. No shades of gray are possible. Perfectionists see their work as either perfect or worthless. The healthy person sees spectrums and variations and exceptions in nearly every area of life.

2. **Overgeneralizations**
   This is the tendency to draw sweeping conclusions from very little evidence. For example, a man who is turned down by one woman after he asks for a date may draw the conclusion that all women will reject him and he will never get a date. The healthy thinker draws conclusions only after taking in a great deal of evidence.
3. Negative Mental Filter
This person filters out any bit of information that is positive or good. She just doesn't hear compliments or words of affirmation or praise. She hears only criticism. The healthy person hears both good and bad.

4. Disqualifying the Positive
This person hears the compliment but discounts it. He explains away words of affirmation or praise. For example, a person who is given a promotion may say, "I don't deserve this. They are just feeling sorry for me because I'm really such a loser." The healthy person receives compliments and praise, and uses them to validate his own self-esteem.

5. Jumping to Conclusions
This person believes she knows at all times, with 100 percent accuracy, what other people are thinking about her. The healthy person assumes she isn't a mind reader.

6. Magnification (Catastrophizing) or Minimization
This person exaggerates the importance of isolated events or encounters. He may magnify his own emotions, mistakes, or imperfections. He minimizes, however, any success he may have. A healthy-thinking person maximizes the good points and minimizes the failures.

7. Emotional Reasoning
This person sees an outcome as directly flowing from her emotions. For example, the person may feel hopeless about passing an exam, so she doesn't show up to take it. The healthy person separates current feelings from future events.

8. "Should" Statements
This person has a rigid set of internal rules about what should, must, ought to, can't, and has to be done. The healthy person knows and expresses the fact that there are very few hard-and-fast rules in life.

9. Labeling and Mislabeling
This person is likely to give himself or another person negative labels such as "stupid," "idiot," "imbecile," "loser," "jerk," or "pig." The healthy person avoids labels. (I like to remind people that God gave mankind the authority and responsibility of naming animals, not human beings.)

10. Personalization
This person blames himself for events over which he has no control or less control than he assumes. I've encountered a number of parents who blame themselves for their teenagers' experimentation with drugs. They become filled with guilt and self-judgment when the fact is, they need to hold the teenager accountable for his choices and behavior. The healthy person refuses to take responsibility or blame for someone else's freewill choices.
REFLECT AND REEXAMINE

I believe many people need to reflect upon several positions and opinions, and reexamine their beliefs about them:

"It's Best Kept a Secret"
A person should keep very few things inside as secrets. The vast majority of secrets are negative. Unthinkable childhood traumas, such as incest and sexual abuse, can so mar the soul that bitterness and hatred smolder for decades, erupting many years later in the form of terrible nightmares, uncontrollable crying, an inability to function in the routines of life, depression, or some other negative behavior. Abusers often tell their victims, "Let's just keep this our little secret." Living with a horrendous secret only seems to work for so long before the weight of emotional baggage overcomes even the hardiest of souls.

Love and Hate May Not Be Opposites
Some people have distortional thinking about love and hate. A high percentage of people I have met believe that love and hate are opposites. In my experience, people with extreme hate rarely have a capacity to show genuine love toward anyone, including themselves. Intense hate is usually born of rejection. Its true opposite is acceptance, which may or may not be the same as love. When a person begins to see that his hatred is rooted in rejection, he can then progress to forgiveness and a release of the toxic emotions he has been feeling.

Pressure May Not Make for the Best Performance
People have said to me, "I work better under pressure." Well, yes and no. A certain amount of pressure seems necessary to motivate some people to work, focus their energy, or prioritize their time. Rarely, however, do we do our best creative work or our best problem-solving and decision-making in an atmosphere of stress. Stress actually decreases a person's ability to cope with difficult circumstances.

EXAMINE YOUR AUTOMATIC THOUGHTS
If I suspect that a patient has distortional thinking, I encourage that person to write in a journal all the ways in which her thinking may have become distorted or self-sabotaging. I ask her to write identifying statements for herself after monitoring the way she refers to herself and talks about herself.

My advice is this: Listen to yourself. Every time you hear yourself drawing a conclusion that may reflect any of Dr. Burns's ten thinking patterns-or anytime you hear yourself applying a label such as "stupid" to yourself-write it down.

Then I ask the person to go back through those journal entries and write next to each label or each possibility of distortional thinking a verse or short passage from the Bible that addresses that perception.

Next, I ask the person to confess to God that she has allowed herself to develop distortional thinking. She has bought into lies. I encourage the person to seek God's forgiveness and to ask
God to set her free from the bondage that these lies have created in her soul. I encourage the person to ask God to heal the toxic emotions and distorted thinking that she has developed.

Finally, I advise the person to memorize the verses that she has written down in her journal. These are the foremost verses the person is likely to need, and to quote, in order to keep distortional thinking from continuing to take root.

Let me share some of the verses from the Bible that I believe have great transforming power when it comes to distortional thinking.

I have worked with countless people who have discovered that once they made a sincere effort to tackle their dysfunctional thought patterns, they had fewer bouts of depression, anxiety, anger, grief, shame, jealousy, and all other toxic emotions. It isn't difficult to replace lies with God's truth. It just takes intentional and consistent effort . . . it takes the time and energy to find statements of God's truth and apply them to life's lies. Jesus promised, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32).

CHOOSE A NEW WAY OF THINKING

The apostle Paul challenged followers of Christ, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2). Part of experiencing a spiritual renewal in your mind is to make a conscious choice that you will change what you put into your mind, and therefore, change your thought patterns.

The Bible has this to say about the choices we make in our thought life: "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things" (Phil. 4:8). Choose to think about those things that evoke positive emotions within you. Focus on them. Emphasize them. Reflect often on them. They are your best line of defense against toxic emotions. John Hagee once said,

“Watch your thoughts, for they will become your words. Choose your words, for they become actions. Understand your actions, for they become habits. Study your habits, for they will become your character. Develop your character, for it becomes your destiny.”