

THE BEHAVIORAL APPROACH



In this chapter I want to teach you some things you might do to guard against unwanted thoughts before they even happen. Most of these strategies I first learned from my recovery in twelve-step programs for addiction. Back in 1987, there were very few groups for sex addiction, so I was told to go to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings, even though I'm not alcoholic. That was one of the best things that has ever happened to me because AA is so rich in wisdom about accountability and what really works. Alcoholics Anonymous has a lot to say about unwanted thoughts, which it calls "stinking thinking."¹ An alcoholic must learn what to do with the thought or temptation of drinking. I believe that all of us can use some of the twelve-step principles whether or not we experience an addiction.

I want to emphasize that these behavioral approaches to taking thoughts captive are only the first step. Behavioral solutions are only short-term strategies, not long-term solutions. Eventually, I want to teach you those longer-term solutions, but the following may help you get started.

Avoiding Triggers

A trigger is stimulus that causes a thought. If you avoid the trigger, you therefore avoid the thought. The first step to use this strategy is to understand what a trigger is and what particular triggers you struggle with. Basically a trigger is anything that goes from your five senses to your brain. You hear them, see them, smell them, taste them, or physically feel them. The other day someone told me that one of the local electronic stores was having a sale. I heard this and immediately started thinking about that new computer I “need” to buy but can’t afford. My thought was of the computer. To avoid it would have required not talking to my friend, or, as part of my accountability program, to have asked him to never mention anything to me about electronics sales.

One of the men I am working with told me today that he was watching a football game and an ad for lingerie came on. It triggered a thought of sexuality in his brain, and the temptation was to go and find more explicit pictures of women on the Internet. To avoid this kind of trigger, he would need to not watch the game or, at least, not watch any of the commercials. Many people tell me they can be at a mall and the sight of attractive people triggers sexual longing. To avoid this, they would either have to avoid going to the mall or, while there, look down or look away. One common strategy for avoiding visual triggers is to “bounce” your eyes. That means if you see something that is visually stimulating, you must bounce your head or your eyes away from it. The men I work with who struggle with sexual thoughts may seek to avoid places where

people are more provocatively dressed, like a beach or swimming pool. Members of Gamblers Anonymous routinely get rid of all credit cards and only carry a small amount of cash in their wallets.

Even in Old Testament times the writer of Proverbs warns about avoiding the trigger of an adulteress: "Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say. Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house, lest you give your best strength to others and your years to one who is cruel" (5:7-9).

One of the most common sexual triggers today comes from TV, magazines, or the Internet. If these kinds of triggers are problems for you, you may need to avoid reading magazines, watching TV, or surfing the Internet.

If thoughts of eating food are your problem, you may be triggered by the sight or taste of food. If I'm in the mall and walk by the cinemas and smell the popcorn, I'm going to want to eat popcorn because the thought of it is in my head. While in the mall, the perfume section of the department store may trigger me into thoughts of an old girlfriend. Driving down the highway I may see the billboard for the lottery jackpot and my thoughts turn to gambling. Are you getting the idea?

Triggers are always based on our life experience. My popcorn trigger is based on years of pleasant times at the movies, all associated with eating popcorn. Food triggers are usually associated with pleasant times in the past, such as times spent with family or connecting with friends. Sexual triggers can be associated with past sexual experiences. Gambling triggers

are always associated with that time you actually won a jackpot. For alcoholics, times of drinking are sometimes associated with fellowship. Remember the TV series *Cheers*? It was a bar and the place “where everybody knows your name.”²

Let’s be realistic; if we are to avoid all triggers, we would have to lead the life of a monk or hermit. This is not very realistic, and I believe my wife would object to that. So avoidance is not the final solution. In the early stages of learning how to take every thought captive, however, there will be obvious stimuli that we may choose to aggressively avoid.

✳️ KEY POINT

Triggers are stimuli that create unwanted thoughts.

✳️ KEY QUESTIONS

- What stimuli do you readily notice? What things do you hear, see, feel, taste, or touch that trigger sinful thoughts in your brain? Remember, everyone is different, so don’t be afraid to claim things that you fear would not trigger anyone else.
- Whatever triggers you today, can you recall some association you have with it in past exciting or pleasant events?
- What might you realistically avoid today so as not to be triggered?

- Would you be willing to be accountable about those triggers?

As I said, you can't avoid all triggers forever. They happen. One of my sayings is, "Triggers are the gift that keeps on giving." So they happen, now what do we do?

The Three-Second Rule

I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl (Job 31:1). Another AA strategy is the three-second rule, which is a basic reminder that if we allow a thought in our brain for longer than three seconds, it becomes a preoccupation or obsession. One of my colleagues says that we may not even have that long, and it is probably more like three-tenths of a second. Whatever is true, we should realize that when an unwanted, selfish, or lustful thought enters our brain, it is probably because of some stimulus, which we should at that point remove ourselves from. So if something on TV is triggering us, we should turn off the TV. If an attractive person triggers lustful thoughts, we should probably figure out a way to politely walk away from him or her. If we are involved in a conversation where the subject matter is a trigger, we might even be honest about it and ask to change the subject.

One of the men I am working with, for example, recently told me that one of his friends was continually sending him information on Web sites that had sexual content on them. At the

risk of his friendship, he directly asked the friend to not send him those emails any longer.

The mantra of this approach can be, “Look away, walk away, turn away, get away, or take a time-out.” Remember, the most important thing is taking every thought captive, not making sure everyone understands what you are doing.

✱ **KEY POINT**

Once we have a thought, we should try to remove ourselves as quickly as possible from whatever trigger caused it in the first place.

✱ **KEY QUESTION**

- Would you be willing to make a covenant with someone and/or your accountability network that you will do what is necessary when a thought is triggered to not let it become a preoccupation or obsession?

Think Through the Drink

Another classic AA strategy is to take a thought captive and imagine the eventual damage that thought might cause in your life. So if an alcoholic is tempted to drink, he or she is asked to remember what has usually happened when he or she drinks. The person is to “think through the drink.” He or she is encouraged to imagine the worst possible scenario. If a person is tempted to drink and then to drive home, he or she would be asked to imagine getting into an accident and being killed or killing someone else, or to imagine being arrested

and losing his or her driver's license. People who have lustful thoughts and fantasize about an affair should think through the consequences of divorce, family breakups, acquiring a sexually transmitted disease, or losing their jobs. Gamblers would see themselves losing until they have lost all of their money and are bankrupt. Overeaters think through the medical consequences of obesity and even death.

Most people have enough life experience with the results of their thoughts to know how awful they can be, making it not hard to imagine future consequences. Unfortunately for some who struggle with addiction, being aware of consequences is not enough to get them to stop. This dynamic can, in fact, be part of what defines addiction.

Once basic sobriety is achieved, however, this strategy can be effective in reminding you to not get started again.

✳ **KEY POINT**

Consequences of past behavior can be used as a deterrent in the future.

✳ **KEY QUESTIONS**

- What have been past consequences of your thoughts?
Make as complete a list of those as possible.
- Would you be willing to share that list with someone?

✦ KEY ASSIGNMENT

Write a letter to yourself as if you had acted out again or had lustful thoughts. Remind yourself in the letter of what the consequences of your thoughts and behaviors would be. Then fold the letter and put it in your wallet. Read as necessary.

Learning to Make Phone Calls

In my book *The 7 Principles of Highly Accountable Men*, I teach about the principles that will keep people accountable to their vision of the future.³ One of the disciplines that is a part of those seven principles is making phone calls to people in an accountability group. What this means in the simplest of terms is that the second an intrusive thought enters your brain, you pick up the phone and call someone to whom you are accountable.

Remember that this assumes you have a group of people who know your story enough to know you have such thoughts. You will need to take the time to share your story with others. You will also need to ask others for permission to call when you need to. Most people who are in accountability networks are willing because they need to make calls themselves. It is most usual, therefore, for you to also receive calls if you participate in a group.

Now, the challenge is that with many temptations and thoughts, there are parallel thoughts such as, “You don’t really want to make this call. It would be so much more fun and much less hassle to have your thought and continue your behavior.”

What this means is that if you wait until temptation happens, it will usually be too late.

My advice is that you get in the habit of making calls every day, whether or not you need to. Most of the time you may simply check in and talk about superficial matters. Then, when you need to call about impure thoughts, you will be in the calling habit. You have traded bad thoughts for good thoughts. You will know that others are expecting your calls and may call you if they don't regularly hear from you.

Often intrusive, unwanted, and obsessive thoughts produce a trance-like state in the brain. The habit of making calls will be a way to break out of that trance. Many people tell me that simply listening to someone else's voicemail message is enough to break them out of the unwanted pattern. In this way, the habit of making and receiving calls is like programming your brain to automatically make calls. It is a very real way to take thoughts captive.

✳️ **KEY POINT**

Making phone calls is a matter of discipline and practice. Remember that the more calls you make a routine, the more calls you will make. There is nothing like talking to someone else to stop unwanted patterns of thought.

✳️ **KEY QUESTIONS**

- How are you at making calls in general? Some people have never been comfortable with it and, therefore, practice for them will be a more gradual process.

- Are you open to receiving calls?
- Would you be willing to ask others if you can call them?

✱ KEY ASSIGNMENT

Put the numbers of the people you are regularly going to call in the speed dial program of your cell phone, that way they are only one button away from helping you take thoughts captive.

Distracting Yourself

Over the years I have talked to countless people who tell me when they have unwanted thoughts, they do something to distract themselves. Basically this means they try to switch to other thoughts that are healthy. Doing this can also be a matter of training your mind. Some tell me they switch to memorized scripture, the words of hymns or songs, or messages they create for themselves.

Of course, some of this can depend on what kind of problem you are dealing with. For example, a man who is struggling with thoughts of an affair may try to switch to thoughts of his wife, kids, or family. Food addicts put pictures of very fit people on their refrigerators to help them switch to their vision of losing weight. A workaholic may try to switch to thoughts of vacations or recreational activities. Do you get the idea?

I will have much more to teach about this later, but for now remember that seeking to distract yourself may lead to frustra-

tion because it doesn't always work. This strategy, like everything else in this chapter, is only one weapon in your arsenal for taking thoughts captive.

✳️ **KEY POINT**

Distracting yourself from unwanted thoughts is very much a matter of practice, some of which includes knowing not to get too frustrated when this strategy doesn't always work.

✳️ **KEY QUESTIONS**

- Do you have scripture, words of music, or other messages memorized?

- If not, would you be willing to?

This is chapter 1 of the book. The strategies are more immediate and can be practiced right away. Don't lose heart when they don't always work or don't work forever. There are strategies ahead that may rid you of all unwanted thoughts, making those in this chapter unnecessary.