



Want to make radical changes in your life? Start with your thoughts.

By Denise King Gillingham, LMSW, CPCC



The mind is its own place and in itself can make a hell of heaven or a heaven of hell.
—John Milton, Paradise Lost

It is a beautiful, sunny day. Your youngest child just left for college. What a wonderful accomplishment—an exciting transition! But instead of being joyful, you are disoriented. For the past 18 years, you have been focused on taking care of children. Thoughts like *Now what? I am scared*, and *What is my purpose?* race through your head.

Throughout the life cycle, we face many transitions like this. Perhaps you are dealing with a loss, a new career opportunity, or a change in family structure or marital status. The reason for the life shift is not important. What is vital is that once you have absorbed the fallout and are ready to move on, you recognize that the path forward begins with your thoughts.

Our thoughts are powerful. They affect many facets of our lives: suc-

cess, relationships, and even our health. Don't you remember when, as a child, you complained about being sick and your mother told you that it was all in your head? Research on the brain, thought patterns, and immunity shows that Mom was right. Negative recurrent thoughts have been shown to have an adverse impact on the immune systems of children, adolescents, and the elderly.¹ In addition to making us unhappy and preventing us from soaring to new heights in life, our negative thoughts are actually making us sick.

So, how can we change our thoughts and live a healthier, more enjoyable life? The following are five hints for generating more-positive thoughts.

Be aware of your self-talk. You might not be aware of how frequently you speak to yourself and

say negative things. Try this to increase your awareness: put a rubber band around your finger or wrist and snap it every time you say something negative to yourself. This will help your awareness. Next, stop and replace the negative messages with neutral or positive messages. For example, instead of telling yourself, *I did poorly on that sales call*, replace the message with, *I will listen actively on my next appointment*.

Be grateful. Count your blessings. No, really. Make a list and count them. Nothing is too small to be on the list. It is difficult to simultaneously have thoughts of negativity and gratitude.

See the good. Every situation can be viewed from many perspectives. Make an effort to see the positive side of a situation or the potential

for growth. Most of us are familiar with post-traumatic stress, but did you know that post-traumatic growth (growing and developing new perspectives due to trauma) is possible, too? To learn more about this and to look at where you rate on the post-traumatic growth inventory, visit the American Psychological Association's Post Traumatic Growth Inventory at <http://cust-cf.apa.org/ptgi>.

Trick yourself and smile. Studies have shown that our faces communicate our states of mind to others and to ourselves.² An extra bonus of smiling is that it relieves stress. It's also easier: it takes fewer muscles to smile than to frown!

Commit to an exercise program. Exercise stimulates the release of endorphins, a neurochemical that is linked to happiness.

Remember, if you think you can do something, you can. The next step is to write down some changes that you want to make in your life. Decide you can do it, and you will! ❀

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CATHY: My hair loss was gradual, but the day my fiancé shaved my head was a very traumatic day. My self-confidence plummeted. I had always had long hair, and when I looked in the mirror I just didn't know who was looking back at me. The tears flowed on a regular basis.

Q: WHAT STEPS DID YOU TAKE TO MANAGE YOUR APPEARANCE THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE?

JESSICA: I looked for information through the American Cancer Society website, where I found Look Good Feel Better and decided to give it a try. I learned how to correctly draw on my eyebrows and eyelashes and how to tie scarves. These skills allowed me to continue with my life.

JANICE: I sought out ways to help boost my self-esteem, which included attending a Look Good Feel Better workshop. The workshop helped lift my spirits. It was wonderful to be around other women who were dealing with the same fight that I was. We had great volunteers, who made the experience fun. I also worked on creating new personalities with the use of wigs, and I arranged to get my head shaved every two weeks so that I felt good about the new style and to keep some parts of my life intact.

The weight loss took a little more creativity. I began to wear more-flowing outfits and brightened my wardrobe, even though it was during the winter. This helped boost my self-esteem during chemo, especially during the holidays, which came at the end of my treatment cycle.

CATHY: Though I'd thought that wearing a wig would be the answer, it wasn't. The wig was hot, and, once again, I found myself not recognizing the woman in the mirror. My skin was dull, and nothing I did seemed to brighten it. Late in my treatment, I was able to attend a Look Good Feel Better workshop, which was a real lifesaver—I felt like myself again. I learned tips on the application of makeup, which gave me some of my confidence back. I not only looked more like me but I also felt more like me. ❀

The Look Good Feel Better program was founded and developed in 1989 by the Personal Care Products Council Foundation, a charitable organization established by the Personal Care Products Council, the leading national trade association representing the global cosmetic and personal care products industry. The program is a collaboration of the Personal Care Products Council Foundation, the American Cancer Society, and the Professional Beauty Association, a national organization that includes salons spas, distributors, manufacturers, and more than 25,000 beauty professionals. For more information please visit lookgoodfeelbetter.org.