



WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY 2011

Do Not Go Back to Sleep by Fr Daniel O'Leary

'Night and day my thoughts are driving me mad. Nor can I pray anymore.' Such anxious cries are becoming more common in our parishes and communities. Few people today are untouched by the temptation to chronic unhappiness, to depression, to despair. And these bleak winter days are no help to such victims of the mind when that temptation comes. It is suggested by many that in our quiet desperation we try too hard to free our mind from such thoughts. We panic at our inability to shift the relentless anxiety we have compulsively built within us. We storm heaven and start novenas. But the more we try the worse it gets. By putting relentless pressure on our minds we only spin the vicious circle faster.

All we are mostly doing, the experts tell us, is reinforcing the patterns of thinking that keep activating our pain. Through a deep, existential fear, perhaps, or a pessimistic turn of mind, we exaggerate the negative, we fearfully and falsely fantasise about the distressing outcome of things. And we take these distorted thoughts as the absolute truth.

These thoughts then trap us, turning a small sadness into a web of anxiety. A harmless event, a throw-away comment can suddenly escalate into a flood of depressing emotions that destroy our sense of worthiness and joy. Too often it is a long way back to what is real and true.

Our very thinking becomes the enemy, according to writers Eckhart Tolle and Richard Rohr. Most of it (85% they claim) serves only to upset us more. John O'Donohue refers to the 'crippling effect of our dried-out, dead thoughts in the cul-de-sac of our lives'. Our incessant, defeatist focusing on things that happen to us, ties us into an even tighter tangle.

A helpful beginning is the understanding that it is not the facts themselves that bring on depressive attitudes, but how our minds deal with those facts. Our habitual reaction to a passing disappointment can transform it into a persistent, unsettling unhappiness. Like a blind automatic pilot, our warped thinking becomes seriously misleading. Our contact with life, with the truth, is no longer a direct or reliable one.

In *The Mindful Way through Depression* authors Williams, Teasdale, Segal and Kabat-Zinn offer a different approach to improving the quality of our lives by practising another way of thinking – a combination of an Eastern meditative tradition and Western cognitive therapy. They ask us to substitute the 'doing mode' of the mind for the 'being mode'.

Instead of allowing ourselves to be seduced into unhappiness by our false and toxic thinking, or our fearful efforts to avoid or suppress emotions – maybe around persistent memories of a long-past humiliation, an imagined fear, or a grief that has lost its way - it is possible to directly encounter and experience those thoughts and emotions without the depressing fabrications we weave around them.

'Mindfulness' is how they describe this process of dealing only with the reality of present experiences rather than linking them with past failures, real or imaginary. The secret is to become aware of ourselves thinking and feeling. This new hygiene of the mind does not desperately fight with, or try to banish 'the enemy within'; rather does it befriend those threatening thoughts and moods, carefully exploring them realistically with a non-judgemental compassion – but eternally vigilant for their deadly tricks, traps and temptations.

It is in this watchful silence, Henri Nouwen believes, that we can recognise the ways we try to hide and avoid facing the truth about ourselves; the way we can come to distinguish the reality of our condition from the irrational scenario of alarm, disgrace or self-blame that we fearfully attach to it.

He pictures our fears and panic as emerging from where we have hidden them, and saying to us, 'You can only be free if you look at us in the face. We are not as awful as you imagine. When you see us as we really are, not as you think we are, you will be free to find your happiness again.'

In the 'being mode' we experience and embrace the objective reality of what is unfolding around us. We acknowledge the way things are, without any mental fencing or forcing. Mindfulness is about paying non-judgemental attention only to what is actually happening at any given moment; not to the fearful anticipation, the false stories, the depressing possibilities that something compulsive inside us wildly weaves as true.

This type of awareness is much more than paying attention more thoroughly, or with more concentration; it is about paying attention differently. It is about how we pay attention. Like standing behind a waterfall, we calmly observe the cascade of our mental distortions without getting dragged down, like defenceless victims, into the pool of depression.

We need to keep reminding ourselves that our unmindful thoughts are passing mental events, like autumn leaves swirling in the wind. They are not reality itself. We must harvest the precious energy of our mind for the current task in hand - to see things as they are, not as we are! Dr Raj Persaud, consultant psychiatrist at the Bethlem Royal and Maudsley Hospitals, traces our inner distress to an inability to 'keep our thoughts and emotions current', to adapt them coherently to the actual changes in our circumstances.

Under the Spirit, a healthy mind will draw the hidden self towards the abundant life. Magnificent and restless, the free and present mind beckons us on ever-new journeys – to feel and fulfil our longing for joy, to bring beckoning horizons within our reach. But the predetermined tramlines of yesterday's dark thinking will not bring us to places of hope or imagination. The Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh wrote, 'To be dead is to stop believing in the masterpieces we will begin tomorrow.'

'Mind your mind' O'Donohue re-minds us. We are all responsible for our own thoughts. We have the spiritual power to choose joy, to respond with gratitude even on a grey day, to think in new directions and happier rhythms. The beautiful, fragile mind is the place of our most profound freedom. That is why, in all its wanderings, obsessions and struggles, it must be nourished, cherished and protected. In the purifying of our mind it is important, the wise ones tell us, to keep constantly grounded in our own bodies and in the energy of the earth.

For many, these dark, winter mornings are the hardest times. Yet, with courage, with dedicated practice, we can welcome each day like a child waking up with a new look in her eyes, blessing with delight everything she looks at, praising God unknowingly for everything she touches. She is the small baptismal priestess within us, presiding at the table of each fresh beginning, consecrating again the bread and wine of our morning minds. 'And don't forget to awake early,' the Sufi poet Rumi reminds us, 'The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Do not go back to sleep; do not go back to sleep.'

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