

## Reducing the Effects of Painful and Unpleasant Thoughts

Our Savior said, as recorded in John 16:33, “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” Dr. David D. Burns said, “If you want to feel better, you must realize that your thoughts and attitudes – not external events – create your feelings.”

We all have painful and unpleasant thoughts from time to time. How we respond to those thoughts determines our attitudes then our feelings. The consequences of our thoughts, attitudes and feelings cover a very broad spectrum including: growing, strengthening or learning from the experience; neutral; angry, depressed for a while, clinically depressed, anxious, etc.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been a major player in reducing negative symptoms (depression, anxiety and anger) caused by unhealthy or illogical thinking and maladaptive behaviors. More recently, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) has also been proven to be effective for similar issues and to help one cope with circumstances one cannot change<sup>1</sup>.

However, the Lord (through the Church) has dealt with these issues for thousands of years, not just a few decades, as the psychotherapists have. What does the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teach and encourage? What do members successfully do?

- Anecdotally, LDS members report that prayer (sometimes fasting and prayer), reading the Book of Mormon, and / or playing or singing hymns calms them down, helps them find peace and / or leads them to solutions. A BYU professor told all of his students to read for 20 minutes out of the Book of Mormon every time they were upset. The brother who told me this also said that technique never failed him. Parallel to this, studies have shown that reading a book for 6 minutes or listening to music are the two fastest, most effective ways to reduce *stress*. Putting this together, a member could be very effective in reducing the effects of painful and unpleasant thoughts by offering prayers, reading a favorite chapter from the Book of Mormon and playing or singing favorite hymns.
- President Ezra Taft Benson’s article “Do Not Despair” was published in the October 1986 Ensign as the First Presidency message. The article lists 12 things to reduce despair: the three already mentioned are prominent in the article. However, repentance was listed first: the other eight are; service, work, health, blessing, fasting, friends, endurance, and goals. Print the article, do all 12 – start now!
- Obtain a broad and deep understanding of the Plan of Salvation. Then you can put the current situation within this perspective. For a most vivid refresher of these concepts, attend the Temple, perform a couple of initiatories, an endowment session and listen to a couple being sealed together forever.
  - Our God knows our name, truly loves us, and understands our suffering in full.
  - Our Savior understands our afflictions as he has experienced suffering in the flesh even more than we have and “descended below them all”.<sup>2</sup> He was schooled, in

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<sup>1</sup> Books for CBT, either *The Feeling Good Handbook* or *When Panic Attacks* both by D. D. Burns, M.D. For ACT, *The Happiness Trap* by Russ Harris or a multitude of “You Tube” videos.

<sup>2</sup> Alma 7:11-12 and D & C 122:8.

the flesh that he might understand, from personal experience, and be filled with compassion.

- The Worth of Souls is great in the sight of God. D & C 18 explains this, Section 19 states what heavy price the Savior paid to save souls and Section 20 tells the prophet how to operate the Church to do his part in helping to save souls.<sup>3</sup>
- We are promised the constant companionship of the Holy Spirit, if we humbly and sincerely ask. From our Savior's personal examples of providing succor to those in need we can also expect to be validated, comforted and encouraged by deity or their authorized representative(s).<sup>4</sup>
- Put problems and challenges in a proper perspective.<sup>5</sup> Some things are mildly uncomfortable, other things are life threatening, and still others are eternal life threatening. Some things we afflict on ourselves, others are caused by someone else exercising their agency and still others are by causes unknown at this time. Sometimes it is the vicissitudes of life or for the glory of God.
- Trials, tribulation, afflictions, etc. can be for our own good. We can grow and become more refined though those trials.<sup>6</sup> That depends on our response.
- Our Heavenly Father administers perfect justice and mercy. Far beyond our comprehension.
- Elder Bruce R. McConkie distinctly testified that if you are on the straight and narrow path at the time you leave this world, nothing can move you off that path on your journey to exaltation. He also clearly defines what he means by "being on the path."<sup>7</sup>
- Ponder the answers you have received from your prayers. Were they comforting when you received them? Are they still? If not, why not? Exercise your Faith and Hope and ponder the revelation and inspirations you have already received. Ask for more, if it is appropriate.
- We have an entire ward family, a rich community of support that includes the welfare program, our own Bishop, Priesthood blessings, Quorum and Relief Society leaders and representative visitors. Some of us are greatly blessed to have relatives near us and very close friends in the church. If we do not, we could begin nurturing such relationships with good people we know.

Clearly, the Lord has many tools to help us on our journey. Our joy in Christ and the Plan of Salvation can carry us through the unhappy times that we all face. In Christ we can find peace.

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<sup>3</sup> See essay *Worth of a Soul* by Dean Bender

<sup>4</sup> See essay *Consoling Words* by Dean Bender

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Ensign March 2014, Maintaining an Eternal Perspective, Elder Dale G. Renlund of the Seventy

<sup>6</sup> D & C 122:7 (1-7) ...if the very jaws of hell shall gape open ... after thee... all ... shall be for thy good.

<sup>7</sup> The Probationary Test of Mortality by Elder Bruce R. McConkie, University of Utah Institute, Jan 10, 1982. The last 850 words, from "Let me append" to "There's great hope for Latter-day Saints..."