Thoughts and Feelings

On the Airplane

The following is an example of how external events (e.g., "something happened" or "someone did or said something") can set off a negative thought spiral which causes and often intensifies negative feelings. For me, one of those spirals occurred during a flight to California a few years ago. After struggling for a while, I reminded myself that my power lies in choosing different thoughts, and that helped me soothe the bad feelings (for the most part!). I hope this story gives you ideas for how to use the thought-change process to cope with a stressful situation.

From, Lexi

About two years ago, I flew to California to visit my sister. As I sat near the gate and waited for the boarding call, I noticed an odor when a group of people walked by. To me, the scent smelled like sweat and was quite pungent. The people happened to be a few groups ahead of me on the same flight. After boarding, I got a trace of the same smell when I settled into my seat, but I didn't think much of it other than hoping I didn't have to smell it the entire trip. (Please note, I mean no disrespect if the smell came from a person/s.)

Sometime after we took off, I noticed the woman beside me (I was in the window seat) seemed to become increasingly uncomfortable. She was shifting in her seat and facing the person next to her (a friend or partner or family member maybe?); he seemed to be trying to soothe or reassure her. I was still getting occasional whiffs of the smell, and then it hit me: She might think I'm the source! Then my thoughts started racing and creating really bad feelings…

> "Crap, what if she thinks it's me?!" FEAR, EMBARRASSMENT, DOUBT, WORRY
>
> "I'm pretty sure it's not me!" ANXIOUS, CONFUSED, PANICKY
>
> "Wait, that's not my smell, even after I mow the lawn. I just took a shower!" INDIGNANT
>
> "Oh no, they both think it's me." MORTIFICATION, SHAME
>
> "It's not like I can go anywhere. There's nothing I can do." POWERLESS, TRAPPED, SMALL

Those last thoughts gave me pause because I noticed the helplessness in them. I said to myself: "Well, you could ask her what's bothering her (yeah right!), or you could offer to help since she's visibly upset (that sounds more like me). You could tell her you smell something and ask if she does too (awkward!)." None of these seemed viable.

Then my stomach dropped when I realized I may have sat in a seat that had the odor, and it transferred to my clothes. So then I really WOULD be the source of it. (MORE PANIC)

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I thought, “Okay, okay, calm down. What are my options?” I could just tell her the truth… “Excuse me, I think I sat in a seat that smelled and it got on my clothes and now I can’t do anything about it and I normally don’t smell that way.” And maybe apologize. Or, I could throw that group of people under the bus, but that seems mean and unfair. Wait, I could put on the mask I brought as if I was smelling it too (thus implying I wasn’t the source). Genius!

Actually, I didn’t end up doing any of those. Instead, I was trying to read not only her mind but the mind of the person next to her. Here were my guesses for her: “Oh my God, that woman smells terrible! That’s so gross! I’m going to throw up. I can’t stand this. I’d rather be by a screaming baby the whole time.” Did I mention that at some point she leaned forward onto her tray table and put her head in her hands? (Also her possible friend-partner-family member started rubbing her back and murmuring to her.)

Seeing those actions sparked more assumptions about her thoughts. In my mind, I heard her saying: “This is murder. I’ve got to get out of here! Is it that hard to take a shower? She %*#-ing stinks!” I took a few stabs at her seatmate’s thoughts, too: “That IS pretty gross. I can smell it too. Yuck. Maybe we can get new seats. Sitting next to her must be torture. Why can’t people just keep themselves clean?”

Speaking of torture, I was doing that to myself internally. These and similar thoughts kept spinning and repeating themselves. I occasionally got more whiffs of the odor which only intensified my anxiety and embarrassment. (Notice that I’m upset about a smell that I may or may not have on me and about thoughts that may or may not have been occurring in other people’s minds.) The woman seemingly tried to distract herself with reading and watching something, but she went back to her head-in-hands position (also more back rubbing).

It struck me that I wasn’t able to read or watch anything either because I was preoccupied with all of my emotional discomfort and guess work. I realized my best option was to practice what I know and teach about thoughts and feelings, meaning theoretically I could choose different thoughts to not feel as bad. I asked myself two questions:

The first was, “What would be other explanations for her behavior?” (see below*)

> I came up with: “She could be terrified of flying or have a migraine or a hangover or a stomachache, etc. She could have motion sickness. Maybe she’s pregnant and has morning sickness (wait, then would her sense of smell be intensified? That’s not helping, Lexi!). Maybe they’re newlyweds on their last leg home from a long journey. Maybe she had a tragedy in her life or was distraught after leaving a loved one.” These thoughts helped a little because I believed those reasons were real possibilities.

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The second question was, "What evidence might suggest that smell is not the issue?"

> I responded: "She hasn't covered or pinched her nose. She hasn't been gagging, coughing, sneezing, clearing her throat, or vomiting (thankfully)… Although I think she did sigh a few times (wait, don't go there!). She hasn't waved her hands in front of her face or used something to fan air away from her. She hasn't gotten up to use the restroom multiple times or to walk the aisles. She and the other person haven't switched places or moved to another part of the plane." I had to admit that these thoughts were valid, although I still felt a bit doubtful and insecure.

Notice my language: By saying the things above "haven't happened," I left room for my mind to add the word, "YET," which implied that those things "may still happen" (hence the doubtful and insecure feelings). Thinking those things could still happen gave me license to continue monitoring the woman's activities (including her unproven, unknown thoughts) and basically perpetuating my own misery.

Finally, I had to acknowledge the fact that the person next to me might really think I smelled bad, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. That felt excruciating! I reminded myself that my point of power in the moment would be to find thoughts that helped me tolerate the fact that "someone might think poorly of me," which I find unbearable.

I reminded myself of the thought-feeling connection. If a situation FEELS unbearable, excruciating, or any other negative emotion, it is because I'm telling myself that it does. So my power was (and always is) in my thought choices. Here's what I came up with for new, better-feeling thoughts:

> "I imagine most of us can't be as fresh as we'd like when traveling." VALIDATED
>
> "Good thing this isn't an international flight!!" RELIEVED
>
> "I know I keep myself clean; I showered right before I left." A BIT MORE CONFIDENT
>
> "I don't know for a fact that she was thinking or feeling any of the things I was afraid of. She may not have smelled anything at all." HOPEFUL
>
> "If she did think I stank, that doesn't mean she was judging or insulting me." REASSURED
>
> "If it turned out that she *was* judging or insulting me, I can decide not to care." HESITANT, UNSURE but open to trying it (okay, this one takes a little practice)
>
> "Chances are very good that I will never see her again!" THANKFUL, COMFORTED

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> "I can wait until they go a few rows ahead of me in line so that I don't have to be near them or overhear any comments (IF there were any)." EMPOWERED
>
> "If someone thinks I smell (or even if I did reek to high heaven), that doesn't mean I'm a bad person, and I didn't do anything wrong." SUPPORTED, ACCEPTED

Needless to say, once I was off the plane, past baggage claim, and out of the airport, the "sting" of my negative thoughts had eased. This served as a reminder that sometimes all we can do is to "get through" an uncomfortable, uncontrollable situation, and we can intervene on our own behalf by changing our thinking at any time. Coming up with new and different thoughts can be challenging but gets easier with practice… And a bonus: It will help you for the rest of your days!