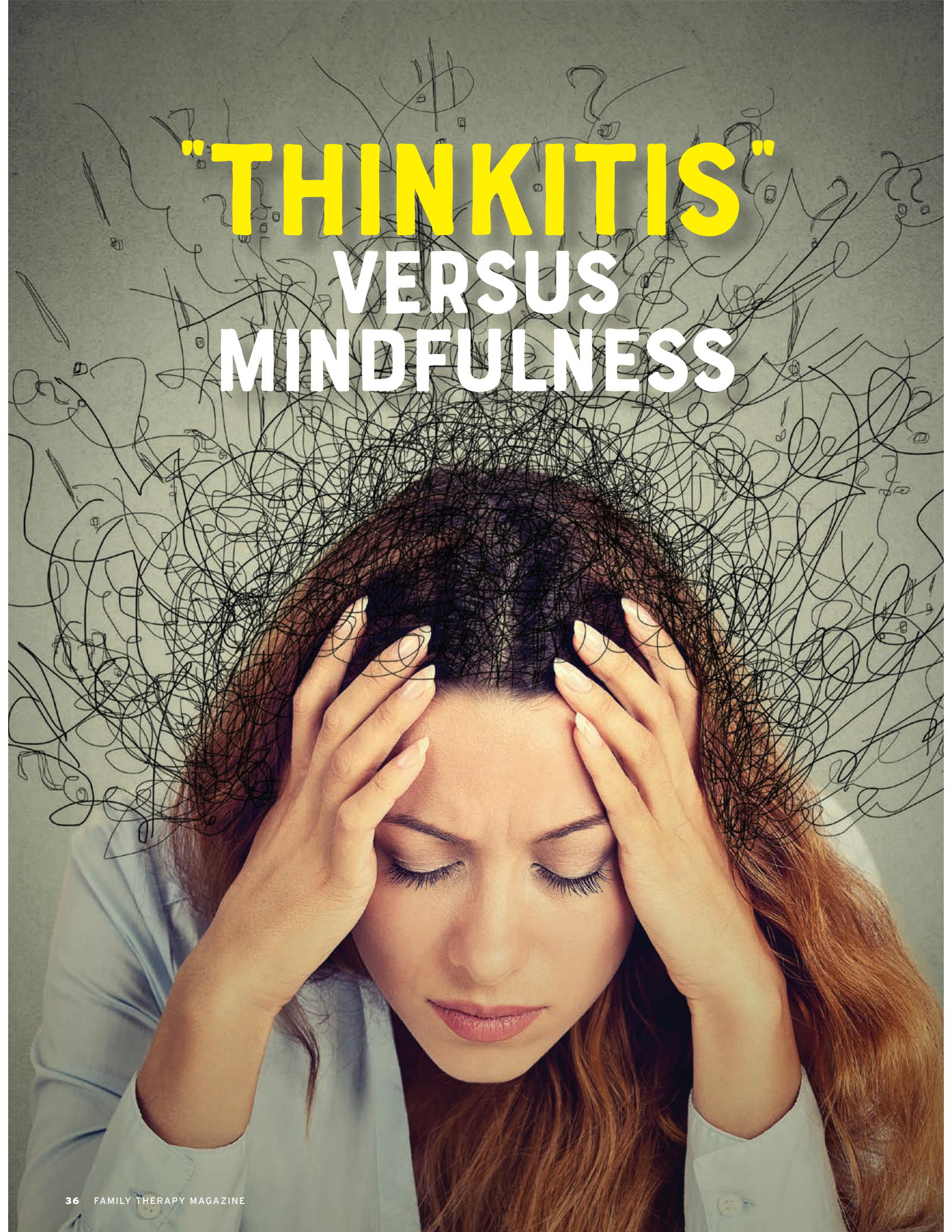


"THINKITIS" VERSUS MINDFULNESS



HOW OFTEN DOES YOUR MIND DWELL AT A DIFFERENT PLACE THAN YOUR BODY?

What can possibly be wrong with doing something as common as walking or driving while lost in thoughts? It may even seem difficult to not think while engaged in these activities, so why might this be problematic? The answer depends on the frequency, intensity, and implications of this thinking state.

Thinking is necessary to plan, reflect, grow, integrate experiences, and move forward. It can enrich our lives, help us become a better person, and contribute to making constructive decisions in relationship. These advantages, however, become diluted when thinking is a constant churning or takes over our lives in a way that disconnects us from here and now experiences. **Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin, PhD**



Since this state of over-thinking can metaphorically be seen as an “inflammation” of thinking processes, I have playfully coined it “thinkitis” with a number of clients. “Thinkitis” involves a narrowing of experience, where excessive thinking mobilizes too much mental space and time, at the expense of other dimensions, which become stifled.

The two main areas of life that are typically affected negatively and compressed by over-thinking are our ability to be present to our embodied sensations, and the outside world. For example, busy parents, captured by their thinking processes, do not pay as much attention as they could to their child’s excitement about a drawing; their minds fail to be touched by the bright colors (conveyed by the sense of sight) and by the child’s pride (outside world). In this example, the parents’ attention remains inward on their own thoughts. While this happens to all of us, it’s the frequency, intensity, and implications of this situation that matters, as it can have many negative effects, including missing out on meaningful moments of life.

If we divide possible areas of focus into three elements: our inner mind, the outer world, and the body (as the bridge between the previous two), then over-thinking has negative effects on two out of three of these dimensions. When the thinking aspect of the mind dominates and wipes out most other experiences, people are much less available to subtle opportunities for joy, satisfaction, and relationships. In a brain wired for survival, greater energy can easily be spent dwelling on problems rather than feeling content. In fact, research has even shown that sadness can activate up to 35 areas of the brain, while happiness tends to activate, on average, about nine (Vytal & Hamann, 2010). We are therefore swimming upstream when clients’ lives become derailed by problems, and their inner experiences become skewed by unproductive,



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Take for example, Zach, a 50-year-old man, who works as a head engineer in Silicon Valley, California, and sought therapy when he realized with alarm that he barely felt joy when learning that his beloved daughter had won a prestigious dance competition. He was in the middle of a work project when the text from his wife announced the exciting news. He acknowledged it, felt a few seconds of joy, and without even realizing it, plunged right back in the stress of work as if nothing happened. It is only later, while driving back home, that he suddenly remembered the text, and became aware of the irony: He worked really hard for his children to have an enjoyable life, but this work ethic had, over the years, dulled his own ability to enjoy precious moments. “How is it,” he asked me later, “that my daughter’s life has come to trigger such a secondary flutter of joy, when she is so important to me, much more than

anything else?” The neuroplasticity of our brains is at work 24/7, whether we want it to be or not (Siegel, 2012). The more we use certain neural networks—like thinking of work—the stronger they get, at the expense of less used paths, such as being joyful. “What can I do?” asked Zach. “I have everything I need to be happy, but I can’t feel it very much even if I try; this is so unlike the person I used to be. Can this be fixed?” Nodding slowly, I answered, “Have you ever heard of mindfulness meditation?” After a pause, Zach replied, “That thing where people focus on their breath ... I’ve heard of it, yes, but never looked into it ... you think that could help?”

Mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness is so much more than focusing on the breath. It is about being present and attentive to the unfolding of experience. This practice can target the broader experience of being open to whatever arises, or be very focused on one thing, such as sounds, sights, smells, a body part, a point, etc. Breath is an important part of this journey. Not only does it allow the outer world inside of us, and the inside air back out, but it is also one of the rare physiological process under the control of both the autonomic (brainstem) and voluntary nervous systems.

The average person breathes about 20,000 times per day, and does not pay attention to a single inhalation. Most of us fail to be aware, even once per day, that we are breathing. If there are 1,440 minutes in a day, shouldn’t we be able to spend at least two to three of those appreciating what keeps us alive? I asked Zach, “Roughly what percentage of your day do you spend thinking of work?” He replied that he sleeps “with my phone on my night stand, so the first thing I do when I wake up is check if there’s anything urgent at work, then I think about the emails while I shower; I might answer while having breakfast, review my meetings plans while dressing, ponder

on the challenges of the day while driving, and then start my day when I get to work ... so, a lot of the time ... in fact, probably 80 to 90% of the time. Now that I'm thinking about this, I'm realizing that even when I'm talking on the phone with my wife, I often still think about work in the back of my mind!" The brain is able to process 600 to 800 words per minute while people speak at an average rate of 125 words per minute (Carroll et al., 1995) so the brain can definitely focus on thinking instead of being present in most daily activities, even during conversations.

I asked Zach what troubles him the most about this over-thinking habit. He exclaimed that it is robbing him of his relationship with his daughter, special family moments, conversations with his wife, and his former appreciation for nature. "Even when I train at the gym, I'm thinking and on automatic pilot; it's robbing my life really, even my values. My wife has been hurt a few times when I didn't remember important things she said because I wasn't really listening. I'm losing myself." Touched by Zach's sorrow, I told him "There is something in you that is alarmed by this course of events, and wants to take action. Which part of you wants to change this? Might making this very appointment reflect the presence of the self you wish to reclaim?" He confirmed that just coming to the session was a step in the direction of changing this habit. "I would like to be playful, appreciative, and caring again; I want to enjoy being in nature, or with people, and stop thinking all the time. I used to be super social! I want to be bigger than just someone who works and thinks."

Clinical practices

Thinking can be recruited to enhance being. Skills always co-exist with problems, but they are embedded in weaker neural networks (Beaudoin, 2010). Clinically speaking, once we find pre-existing neural networks for the desirable experience, we can



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use mindfulness to heighten their encoding, strength and accessibility in the brain (Beaudoin & Duvall, 2017).

In Zach's case, this meant first noticing moments that could be enjoyable or fit with his preferred identity. This involved a detective-like task and recruited the over-thinking habit against itself. For example, I invited Zach to find something he appreciated in nature when he walked from the parking lot to his

office, by asking himself: "Which tree/plant would I want to remember in enough details to draw it (if I could)?" Activating the mind with a question is similar to thinking, but its focus is on being present. I also proposed that he program his phone to buzz at certain times to remind him to stop thinking of work, and shift into being aware of a feeling or his surroundings for a minute or so. This progressively allowed Zach to increase

the frequency of non-thinking times, which ultimately represents a double gain in a neuroplastic brain: 1) “Thinkitis” neural networks weaken when they’re less activated, and 2) mindful awareness networks increase in strength through regular activation.

Embodied experiences can infuse therapeutic conversations with rich colors. Once the frequency of noticing increased, we began examining in detail his experience of these special moments, including body sensations. Engaging in clinical work without involving embodied sensations would be like working with a black and white picture of experience instead of its color version—a lot would be missing. The body is deeply involved in all experiences; what would love or anger be without the body’s activation? Our clinical work ought to therefore include mindful awareness of embodied sensations in problematic experiences to develop compelling opposite sensations in counter-states (Beaudoin, 2016; Beaudoin & Duvall, 2017).

For example, with Zach, thinkitis was associated with short, shallow, and fast breaths, while gratefulness and caring were associated with longer, slower, peaceful breaths, which he felt were like sleeping breaths. Body scans and breathing exercises were practiced, paying careful attention to pace and the outbreath, since the parasympathetic process of exhaling is what really relaxes people.

Attention gives power to the object of its gaze. With an increasing frequency of noticing preferred moments and an awareness of associated body sensations, clinical conversations then shifted to intensifying desirable feelings and sensations. Zach realized he really enjoyed it when his little dog slept on his lap when he was working on his computer at home. This opened the door to a whole new set of embodied sensations which could

be intensified, such as the heaviness of the dog on his thighs and his own sense of weight. Relaxation is often associated with a sense of warmth and heaviness, which can be intensified and spread to various areas of the body through mindful concentration.

For example, during a mindful exercise, I asked Zach how heavy he felt on a scale of 1 to 10 (he said a 7), and I asked him to increase it one notch. The mere action of paying attention to a sensation usually gives it more power (pain is a good example of that for many people). Since Zach’s experience became richer, diversified, and less stuck in over-thinking, he ultimately engaged differently with work. He responded to struggles in a less personal way, and left more space for his colleagues to step in rather than taking responsibility for everything. This growing ability to disconnect from overthinking about work eventually left him more available to connect with his loved ones in meaningful ways, reclaim his playfulness, and increasingly open to cultivating positive emotions in clinical conversations (Beaudoin, 2015; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

By the end of our work together, Zach found a balance between thinking about work, remaining mindful when exercising at the gym, and being his caring, playful self with his loved ones. He even chose to miss work to attend his daughter’s spring dance competition, as he wished to fully share the experience with his family.

Zach reclaimed his ability to be mindful, feel, sense, embody and live joyful moments in his life. He still thinks a lot, but in a productive, contained way that does not limit his life. And when driving, sometimes he thinks of work, and sometimes, he just looks out the window noticing colors, movements, places, things, people, and . . . the road!



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