

Spring Clean Your Mind

By Helen Cartwright

Our brilliant brains are at work 24/7. We absorb information all the time: from our clients, our family, our team, on the drive to work, in the gym, in the supermarket - we are constantly absorbing what's around us. Most of it just flies in and gets stored away.

But occasionally something will come into our mind and will have a more lasting impact, and over a period of time, the little things can start to impact in more ways than you realise.

It might be a worry about a client, or a disagreement with a team member, or something we have seen on the news.

Whatever it is, these negative niggles can take up space in our brain and start to impact our mood and our productivity. It's quite hard to explain just how it builds up, but it's easy to spot when you don't have enough mental space; Life is harder, you're overwhelmed more easily, tired and without your usual zing. We spend more time on mindless scrolling, it's harder to sleep, and harder to concentrate.

That's why it's so important to take some time every now and then to clean out our mental space. Just like we need to declutter our physical space, we need to declutter our thoughts.

I challenge you to audit your thoughts for a day, just one day, and do it every few months, or with the change of seasons.

If you find you have a persistent thought, going round and round in your head; we call this a looping thought - a cognitive emotive loop - and it's very common.

Someone makes a comment and for whatever reason it gets stuck in your head, and amplified, and you go back to it over and over again. It can be triggered by anything, and frequently it's something really tiny. Once you've identified what's taking up space in your mind, you can start the process to let it go.

I have four different tricks to help with this:

The first thing to do is interrupt the thought.

So the next time you catch yourself drifting off to that mean thing someone said, I want you to stop. Remember reading this article and think about the happiest day of your life. And think about it for 17 seconds. 17 seconds is all it takes to disturb that thought and send it packing. If it comes back again, do it again, and again and again.

This is called Cognitive Diffusion - and your brain catches on really quickly.

Before you know it you will think of that person and smile, because over time you brain then begins to associate that mean thing that person said to you, with the happy feelings you remember from the best day of your life.

The second thing you can do is stop it in its tracks, and ask yourself, is it actually true?

99% of the time whatever it is that has stuck in your mind is not true, especially when it's a worry about something in the future. So this time, instead of thinking of the worst case scenario - the thing that is worrying you, I want you to flip it. What if the complete opposite is true? And just sit with that for the moment.

The third thing you can do is Label The Thought. Say to yourself Aha! It's just one of those looping thoughts again, and I'm just going to let it go. Give the thoughts a name, give them a calm name, and see how it changes the way your brain deals with them.

I used to get really stressed on days when I knew I had difficult clients to deal with (yes, we all have them)! But then I renamed them all Buttercups. So instead of worrying about what they would say to me or what they might complain about this week, I would say to myself in the morning, Oh, I have a couple of Buttercups coming in today, and sudden they just don't seem so scary.

This process of naming things we don't like or enjoy engages the front cortex - that's the brilliant unicorn part of your brain, and it helps you deal with life with much greater perspective. This is known as a Cognitive Restructuring Technique.

And the final thing you can do is bring yourself back into now. So when it's a thought that is dominating your mind and you can't seem to think your way out of it, then find something you can see, feel, hear or smell. Shift your focus away from your thoughts back into the present moment. Again this is a super-fast way to disrupt that negative thought pattern.

If you can take on the challenge of interrupting your negative thoughts every time they pop up for one day, you will feel amazing.

But if you can do it for just five days in a row, you will change your life dramatically.

And you will have more space in your brain for the things that really matter. ●

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Helen is a therapist, business mentor and coach on a mission to help women harness the power of their minds and make their dreams come true.

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