Don’t Think About Your Thoughts

Psychological problems of any kind become entangled with our thoughts, and as a result, if you are struggling psychologically, you probably also have recurring thoughts that cause you pain. For example, if you are depressed, you may have the thought, “I’m worthless and no one loves me” or even just “When will this depression ever go away?” If you are suffering from generalized anxiety disorder, you may have the thought, “Vigilance is the only way to be safe.” Now, try to isolate a single thought that contributes to your current suffering. You can use the examples above as models. If you can, deconstruct your thought until you have it in the form of a short sentence or simple phrase. When you have this sentence or phrase in mind, complete the exercise.

Write down a thought that contributes to your suffering in the space below.

__________________________________________________________________________

How many times have you had this thought in the last week? (If you do not know exactly how many times, make an approximation.)

__________________________________________________________________________

Time yourself for five minutes. Try as hard as you can not to think that thought. Return here when you are finished.

Write down the number of times you had your thought, however fleetingly, while you were trying not to think about it. _________________

Now, take another five minutes, and allow yourself to think anything you want. Come back here when you are finished.

How many times did you think your thought when you allowed yourself to think about anything at all?

Go ahead and write down your answer here: _________________

As you began to try to suppress your thought, what was your experience? Did it become less heavy, less central, and less evocative? Or did it become more entangling, more important, and even more frequent? If your experience was more like the second description than the first, this exercise illustrated an important point. It can be useless or even actively unhelpful to try to get rid of those thoughts you do not like.