

Ep #4: How Your Thoughts Trigger Your Emotions



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Angela Kelly

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Welcome to The Empowered Principle Podcast, a not so typical, educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy, by refining your most powerful tool: your mind. Here's your host, certified life coach, Angela Kelly Robeck.

Hello empowered principals. How are you guys doing today? I am so happy. It is now January, I am back in Santa Cruz with my lovely husband and my wonderful son, he is home for six weeks. We celebrated Christmas and New Year's together, and now it is January 2018. Happy New Year, guys. I hope you had a relaxing and restful and fulfilling and rejuvenating holiday break. I hope you spent time with family and friends, and really got some down time and I hope you did not work. Because every brain, everybody needs down time. So happy, happy new year.

Alright, in the last episode, I shared with you my core teaching tool, which is called The STEAR Cycle. And in the next few episodes, we're going to break down The STEAR Cycle and take a look at how it flows and how the components interrelate. I really want to give you time to process how all of this works together so that you can begin to understand your own thinking and how it's impacting your life on a daily basis, both at work and at home.

So today we're just going to take a look at how our thoughts trigger our emotions. So let's go back and define what a thought is. In the most simple of terms, a thought is just a sentence that occurs in the brain. While there is some dispute out there, most sources will say that the brain has anywhere from around 50,000 to 70,000 thoughts per day, which breaks down to about, I don't know, 35 to 48 thoughts per minute. Thoughts just appear. They are appearing constantly, and you can't tell your brain to stop thinking.

You can meditate, of course, and learn not to try and persevere on the thoughts that do appear, but your brain cannot turn on and off producing

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thoughts. It doesn't have an off switch. So although you can't stop thinking and thinking thoughts, you can learn to manage the thinking. And this is the core of what it means to become emotionally fit, and this is my charge. This is what I want to share with the world and with all of you educators out there. This is possible.

So when you break down what emotions are, they're really just a vibration in our body. That's why we call them feelings, because we feel them. We physically feel our emotions. So a thought appears in the brain, and our body responds to the thought through emotion. What we feel when we experience an emotion is a physical response to the thoughts occurring in our mind. So emotion starts with a thought that occurs in the brain, and it sends a message down to the body. It's different than a body sensation. A body sensation is a message that starts in the body and sends the message up to the brain. A sensation is the body's way of communicating its needs.

So when your stomach growls because it's hungry, the growl is initiated in the stomach, which then sends a signal up to your brain, telling you to eat. So that sensation is involuntary in nature. Emotions on the other hand are determined when we give a certain meaning to the thoughts on a situation. So a situation, which is a circumstance outside of our control, is always neutral until we give it meaning through the thoughts we think. When we think a thought and we believe the thought to be true, it will trigger either a positive or a negative emotion.

So for example, whenever you're feeling worried, you are thinking and believing thoughts that something bad could or will happen. Worry basically just equals fear. When you're feeling worried and anxious, concerned, all of those levels of anxiety or fear, you are experiencing thoughts that you believe are true, that have you feeling and thinking something bad could happen.

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So when I talk about emotion, I will usually refer to them as positive emotions, which are emotions that make you feel good in your body, things like being happy, excited, being at peace, or negative emotions. Emotions that do not feel good in your body, emotions such as anger, and fear, sadness, shame, embarrassment. I try to highlight the two. There will be times when you feel neutral about something, and we can cover this more in detail at a later time, but basically a neutral feeling or a very mild feeling one way or the other simply just means you're not attaching a lot of meaning behind a thought that you're having.

So what I want to express to you now and what's really important to understand is that all emotions are caused by our thinking. And I know this is something tricky to wrap your head around because it feels like, and it seems like our thoughts make us believe that it's the outside circumstances and situations that cause us to feel a certain way, when somebody does something to us we believe it's because of what they did that we feel a certain way. But the truth is that it's what we think in that split second between the circumstance, the situation, and the emotional reaction that occurs.

So the tricky part is that it happens so quickly it's really a challenge to see that it's the thought causing the emotion, and because the brain is capable of creating several thoughts instantaneously, which immediately trigger emotional responses in the body, it's hard for our brain to fathom that it's the thought causing the feeling. This is why understanding The STEAR Cycle is so important. STEAR will help you slow the process down in order to take time and analyze it one component at a time. And you typically have to do this in the future, right? It's hard to do it in real time. The more practiced you get though, you can catch it and you can start to see how the thought triggers the emotion. It will get easier with time.

Okay, so the first thing that people want to do when they cognitively understand this concept is to change their thinking immediately. Once you

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understand, "It's my thought causing my emotion, if I'm feeling badly and feeling negative emotion about a situation, I'm just going to change the way I think about it." Well, unfortunately it's not quite that easy to thought swap most of the time. Your brain's really efficient at producing thoughts so it creates multiple thoughts around an issue in a very short amount of time. So where you think you might be able to think differently about one aspect of a situation, your brain is still creating other thoughts around that situation in an effort to protect you and show you evidence that its thoughts are true.

So I suggest just simply starting with awareness. When a situation is bothering you and you're having some form of negative emotion about it, just simply start by writing down all of the thoughts that come up about it. Listing the thoughts, just that action, you'll start to see a pattern and you'll see which ones stand out to you the most. So for example, let's say you have a teacher who is struggling in the classroom. She's really struggling with classroom management. It's been a long year and you cringe as you hear the chaos from down the hall, and every time you enter the room you see students up from their seats, there's paper and materials all over the floor, and the teacher tends to raise her voice to get the student's attention.

You notice this one day, you're walking by, you step aside and look peek in, and you're so disturbed that you head back to your office. Thoughts are appearing, they're coming at you. What you can do is go to your office, take a moment, and write them down. Now, don't hold back. Do not judge the thoughts. Put them down on paper. You can burn this piece of paper if you want to, but it's important to get the real thoughts out. If you hinder the thoughts or you feel like you shouldn't write down certain thoughts because they're bad thoughts or negative thoughts or they're condescending thoughts, you won't get to the core of what your brain is producing in terms of thought. So you have to be brutally honest when you write these down.

So I put myself in a state of mind, what if this were my teacher, I'm a principal, I've been working with this person, and I walk by and I see the

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chaos and I hear the chaos and I flare. My emotions flare. I go to my office and this is what popped out for me. "What is going on in there? She cannot handle the students, that room is total chaos. There are no systems in place. This is such a mess. I cannot believe parents are not complaining. She does not seem to understand or implement the instructional coach's suggestions. What is going on? I'm not even sure where to start with her. We have had this conversation before, I'm so frustrated."

So that simply was what I call like a thought list, or a mind dump. You just list every thought that pops into your brain, one after the other. No judgment, no holding back. You jot all of them down that come to mind, and this series of thoughts creates that emotion. And interestingly, my emotion actually came out in the form of a thought. Did you notice that? At the end I said I'm so frustrated. Often times when I do thought lists and I'll spend five minutes writing it down, almost always my emotion sentence will come out. So in this case, it was frustration.

And just notice how your body responds when you think this series of thoughts and it gets you fired up. I mean, I can feel it just explaining it to you now. So what I tend to do is my teeth grit, my jaw gets clenched, I feel a tightness in kind of my stomach and my chest, and when I believe these thoughts are true, your body physically responds in the form of that vibration so that vibration that takes place, that anger, that frustration is happening all over the body. And it's coming from the brain, the series of thoughts.

It is not comfortable to feel negative emotion, but I want you to understand, feeling physical vibration from emotion will not harm you physically. The brain thinks that it will harm you, which is what I talked about in an earlier episode, about that fight or flight response system that our body physically has. So when we experience negative emotion, we have this adverse vibration in our body and we spend a great deal of time and energy avoiding the feeling of negative emotion. We tend to ignore, we

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procrastinate, or we distract ourselves because having to think about why we are frustrated is really uncomfortable in the mind and in the body.

And the problem with avoiding these negative emotions without taking time to observe the thoughts is that nothing changes. You still feel terrible. You feel the bad vibration, you feel the negative emotion. And the brain produces these thoughts that are creating this experience for you, right? So if you don't take time to acknowledge one, the negative emotion, and two, the thoughts behind that emotion, you're actually encouraging it to linger and expand. Negative emotions are designed to get your attention. They are present on purpose, to stimulate a desire for change. That is why they're there.

So here's the rub, guys. We are wired to seek out pleasure and to avoid pain. Our brains never want us to feel pain or painful thoughts. And remember, the brain cannot tell the difference between real danger and perceived danger, so it's constantly working to protect you from any feelings of pain. It doesn't know the difference. So basically, what your brain is doing is everything in its power to guide you towards activities and thoughts that bring you happiness and pleasurable feelings and guide you away from the activities and thoughts that bring about painful thoughts, painful feelings, painful discomfort, right? It causes painful vibrations.

That is why we find ourselves avoiding and resisting reactions that our brain deems as painful, including thinking thoughts that trigger negative emotions. So our brain has us believing that if we never want to feel negatively, all we have to do is not feel negative emotion. We just avoid it, or we buffer it, or we numb it. But if we do not enquire and question and ask ourselves, "Is this thought even true?" we don't have the opportunity to actually change the thought.

So if you think about this, there are situations out in the world that you actually don't want to feel happy about, right? For example, when I think of

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child abuse in any way shape or form, anybody abusing or hurting a child in any way shape or form brings about extremely negative vibrations in my body.

Now, if I want to stop and think the thought - wait a minute, if I want to question the thought, do I believe that child abuse is bad? Well, I'm feeling bad when I believe that thought is true, so I don't want to think that. But that's not true. I actually do want to think that. I do want to believe child abuse is bad because it triggers an emotional response so visceral that it makes me want to take action, which is actually why I went into teaching because I love children so much, and it was one way to serve children in a kind and loving way.

So let me get this clear. Your brain produces thoughts, your thoughts trigger emotions, and then you get to decide how you want to feel. If you don't like the way you feel and it's negative, you can look at your thoughts and try to change them, or you can decide, "You know what, I want to feel this way because I do not agree with what's happening in that circumstance, in that situation. I want to feel negative emotion." It drives me to take action to solve the problem. So I use the negative emotion as a leverage for action.

So the key, guys, is this. You have to determine whether you like your brain's rationalization, which I just - rationalization to me is just a string of thoughts about a situation. You have to decide if that string of thoughts on a situation is do you like it or not. If you look back to this classroom example that I used and you want to feel frustrated about the lack of classroom management because you want high student engagement and you want smooth classroom systems in place in your school, then you use your emotion of frustration to guide your approach with this teacher.

You might have a crucial conversation with her explaining your concerns, perhaps you offer time with her, offer time with the instructional coach, or

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maybe you offer to send her to a workshop on a classroom management systems. This approach, these actions that you're choosing to take stems from your feeling of frustration and the desired result of stronger classroom management.

However, on the other hand, if you do not want to use frustration as a leverage in this case, and you don't want to approach the situation from a place of frustration, observe the thoughts, write them down, and then take a moment to think about other ways of observing this situation. What are some other thoughts you can create that would trigger emotions that were not frustration? You get to decide how you want to feel. So perhaps you would like to feel more compassion for her and her students. So if you want to approach this situation from a place of compassion rather than frustration, and it's your choice, you can look at the situation wanting to feel compassion, and different thoughts come up.

So for example, in my case, if I want to approach this situation from a place of compassion, I'm going to put compassion into The STEAR Cycle under the emotion component, and I'm going to see what thoughts pop up for me. And when I look at this, I'm looking at this situation as a classroom management issue, poor classroom management. I skip the thought like for now, and then I go to the emotion and I put in compassion. And when I look at the cycle with just the situation of poor classroom management and the emotion inputted, which I inputted compassion, you can start to see how the feelings of compassion might have an impact on your approach.

So for me, I start to think differently. If I'm feeling compassion for this teacher and her students, I'm thinking thoughts like this. "Teaching is really hard. She is a first-year teacher. Everyone deserves time to learn and grow." Those thoughts come up for me when I'm feeling compassion for this teacher. So whatever thoughts work for you, choose them. Once you've chosen a thought that really resonates with you and it feels true in the body, and you'll know that because you feel this sense of alignment

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with the thought, consider finding evidence of how that thought is true, or more true than the thought that led to frustration.

So for example, if the thought that everyone deserves time to learn and grow best resonates with you, then you can think of times that you've needed time to learn and grow. That is evidence that helps your brain believe the thought, truly believe the thought about the teacher, and you start to feel a real sense of compassion for her. Another way to approach this is to completely feel in two STEAR Cycles side by side, and just to compare. Compare compassion and compare frustration as emotions to see how the situation might play out. Then you get to decide how to truly want to feel, and if you think frustration is a better leverage, or compassion is a better leverage. I'm not here to judge which leverage works better for you. It depends on the situation. It depends on your state of being, your state of mind.

So each emotion will definitely have an impact on your approach, and it can turn out that the result, which what you want is better classroom management, ends the same whether you use frustration or compassion. But my point is this. The thoughts you think create the feelings you have. And what I invite you to consider is how you want to feel about this situation at the end of it. When this experience of this situation is over, how do you want to remember the situation? The thoughts that you have today are creating the memories you will have tomorrow.

So take time to observe your thinking simply by writing them down. Just list it all out. You'll be astounded at what your brain thinks. I know I am. To this day I am. Every day I wake up, I do a thought download. I write it down, I list it all out, and most of the time one or two, maybe three thoughts really stand out to me. I'm like, "Wow, I didn't realize I was even thinking that. Let me explore this, put it in a STEAR Cycle and let's play this out. Let's see how it's impacting me." And I get really excited because I never knew that

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thought was even lingering back there. So I get to take the time to dissect it, observe it, be aware of it.

Sometimes I'm not able to change it. That just happened to me this morning actually. There was a thought that I was working on, I was like, "No, I'm not ready to change, I'm not ready to believe that this isn't true." That's okay. That's totally okay. You can simply observe them, write them down, and become aware. That is such a huge step, guys.

So what I found most fascinating about being a principal is how much of this work was really on myself. I entered into the position as a new principal, believing it was my job to manage the people, manage the campus, manage the students, put systems in place, manage all the people in my life around me. And what I learned over the course of those six years was that the real work is all about me. It's all internal work, my friends, and it's not easy. But it is absolutely the most transformational.

So get those thoughts onto paper, and just be aware that they're there, okay? Notice how you feel when you think different thoughts. Just notice the connection between thoughts and emotions. That is your work this week, my friends.

Alright, that is it for today. I want to thank you so much for listening. Thank you everybody who has taken a moment to like the podcast, to write a review on the podcast. It means so much to me. I know when I look at podcasts on iTunes, I want to see that people are liking what's going on. This work is so important to me and if you found it helpful, I ask that you share it with your fellow colleagues, fellow principals, fellow teachers, and take a moment to write a five star review on iTunes so we can get this message out to as many educators as possible.

I also want to add this. Because I am so excited and I want to get the word out, I've decided - I'm doing two things. One, I'm going to offer free

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coaching to three individuals who write a five-star review, and I'm going to enter all people who write a review into a drawing for a free \$100 Amazon gift card because I want you to know how much I value your time, and I value the work you're doing with children. I want to acknowledge it in the way I know how best, and the way I know how best is through coaching, so I'm going to be offering three coaching positions in my schedule for six weeks, guys, that's 30 minutes a week with me for six weeks straight, to get your life and your thoughts turned around.

The other thing I'm doing is offering a drawing for three Amazon gift cards for \$100 each. So three of my listeners will win a \$100 gift card to Amazon. And this I know. Teachers and principals spend a lot of their own money on children, on school, on supplies, on materials, I know you do. I know you do. This is my little, tiny gift of giving back. So if you're listening, if you haven't taken a moment to write a review, please do so. I will enter your name into the drawing, the drawing is going to take place in the next couple of weeks. So be on the listen.

Alright guys, have an amazing week, an empowered week, and enjoy. Take care, bye-bye.

Thanks for listening to this episode of the Empowered Principle podcast. If you enjoyed this episode and want to learn more, please visit www.angelacoaching.com where you can sign up for weekly updates and learn more about the tools that will help you become an emotionally fit school leader.