



Week 3 – Rewiring Patterns of Thinking

I. Why Thoughts Shape Our Reality

Repeated patterns of thinking can create lenses through which we view the world – ultimately influencing our choices, habits, and life trajectory. Negative or irrational thought patterns, known as cognitive distortions, act as internal filters that “increase our misery, fuel our anxiety, and make us feel bad about ourselves” Over time, these distorted thoughts can erode self-esteem and motivation and even contribute to issues like anxiety, depression, and substance use. (In essence, unchecked thoughts solidify into beliefs, drive our actions, and can set the course of our lives – hence recognizing and correcting distortions is crucial to changing one’s destiny for the better. Common cognitive distortions include:

- **All-or-nothing thinking** – viewing situations in black-or-white extremes with no middle ground (e.g. “*I failed this task, so I’m a complete failure*”)
- **Overgeneralization** – seeing a single negative event as part of an endless pattern (e.g. “*This bad thing happened once; it will **always** happen*”)
- **Mental filter** – focusing only on the negatives in a situation, no positives
- **Catastrophizing** – expecting the worst-case scenario to happen
- **“Should” statements** – *labeling yourself* – rigid self-critical rules about how you or others must behave
- **Personalization** – interpreting things as directed at you
- **Mind-reading** – assuming the thoughts of someone else

II. How Toxic Thoughts Become Mental and Emotional Strongholds

1. Fear: The Root of Anxiety and Avoidance (*Deception*)

- Fear is an adaptive response designed to protect us from danger, but when it becomes chronic and irrational, it can turn into anxiety, phobias, or avoidant behaviors.

- Over time, fear-based thinking limits a person's ability to take risks, grow, and trust others or themselves, reinforcing self-doubt and paralysis in decision-making.
- The Pressure to Be "Strong" and Suppress Emotions: Many Black families instill in their children the need to be "strong" in the face of adversity. This is particularly prevalent among Black men, who are often discouraged from expressing vulnerability. Studies show that Black men report higher rates of untreated depression due to the stigma associated with seeking help (APA, 2021).
 - ❖ **Isaiah 41:10** – *"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."*
 - ❖ **2 Timothy 1:7** – *"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and a sound mind."*
 - ❖ **1 John 4:18** – *"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."*

2. Guilt: The Weight of Perceived Wrongdoing (*Distraction*)

- Guilt can be either healthy (motivating change) or toxic (leading to self-condemnation).
- Unresolved guilt fuels rumination (*constantly replaying past mistakes*) and can lead to perfectionism or self-punishment
- Discipline as Fear-Based Control: Many Black parents today use strict or harsh discipline, not out of cruelty but out of a historical need to protect their children from danger.
- Mistrust and Emotional Walls: Generations of trauma have taught Black families to be emotionally guarded, leading to relationship struggles, difficulty expressing affection, and avoidance of deep emotional conversations.

Breaking the guilt stronghold: self-compassion exercises, forgiveness work (including spiritual practices), and separate guilt from identity

- ❖ **Psalm 32:5** – *"Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.' And you forgave the guilt of my sin."*
- ❖ **1 John 1:9** – *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

3. Shame: The Deepest Identity Wound (*Deception, Discouragement*)

- Unlike guilt ("*I did something bad*"), shame says "I AM bad." This emotion is particularly destructive because it attacks a person's core sense of worth.
- Trauma research shows that toxic shame is often linked to childhood experiences, abuse, or rejection, creating strongholds of low self-esteem, unworthiness, and self-hatred.
- Shame-based beliefs often lead to isolation, self-sabotage, or even numbing behaviors like addiction or avoidance to escape deep emotional pain.
- Intergenerational Trauma and Toxic Parenting Styles: Intergenerational trauma often arises from untreated mental health issues or toxic parenting styles that have been passed down. In many Black families, physical discipline, emotional distance, and unrealistic expectations stem from historical oppression, where survival required a hardened approach to child-rearing.

Breaking the shame stronghold: Healing shame requires self-acceptance, safe relationships, and reframing life stories with self-compassion rather than judgment.

- ❖ **Isaiah 61:7** – "*Instead of your shame you will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace you will rejoice in your inheritance.*"
- ❖ **Romans 10:11** – "*Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.*"
- ❖ Jesus bore our shame on the cross so we could live in freedom and dignity. God does not want us to dwell in shame but to walk in His love.

4. Insecurity: The Breeding Ground for Self-Doubt (*Distraction, Discouragement*)

- Insecurity stems from low self-esteem, negative self-talk, and social comparison, leading to constant self-questioning.
- It often manifests in imposter syndrome, chronic people-pleasing, and fear of rejection, keeping people trapped in cycles of external validation.
- Left unaddressed, insecurity can lead to dependence on others' approval, difficulty setting boundaries, and fear of stepping into leadership or purpose-driven roles.

- **The Impact: Emotional Detachment & Avoidance of Deep Relationships:** Many Black men and women experience emotional numbness or avoidance of intimacy due to childhood trauma. A study from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) found that Black individuals raised in emotionally detached households struggle with forming secure attachments in adulthood (NAMI, 2022). Many people in Black communities have been raised under the idea that vulnerability equals weakness. This can manifest in relationships where Black men struggle to communicate emotions or where Black women feel they must carry everything alone, often leading to strong Black woman syndrome—a term used to describe the emotional burden placed on Black women to be resilient at all costs.
- **Perfectionism & Burnout:** Instills the need to be exceptional at all costs, often leading to stress and imposter syndrome.
- **Internalized Racism:** Some statements discourage embracing natural features, reinforcing Eurocentric beauty standards.

Breaking the insecurity stronghold: affirmations, positive self-talk, and confidence-building to strengthen self-worth from within.

- ❖ **Psalm 139:13-14** – *"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made."*
- ❖ **Jeremiah 1:5** – *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart."*
- ❖ **Ephesians 2:10** – *"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*
- ❖ **Romans 8:38-39** – *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Common Negative Statements from Black Parents (1970s vs. Today)		
Category	1970s Common Sayings	Today's Common Sayings

Discipline & Tough Love	"I brought you into this world, and I'll take you out."	"You better stop crying before I give you something to cry about."
Academic Pressure & Success	"You have to be twice as good as them (White people) to get half as much."	"You better not come home with anything less than an A."
Emotional Suppression	"Stop crying. Ain't nothing wrong with you."	"Man up. We don't do weak in this house."
Survival & Fear-Based Control	"Don't embarrass me in front of these White folks."	"You better know how to act when the police pull you over."
Body Image & Appearance	"You getting too big. Ain't nobody gonna want you if you fat."	"Your hair too nappy, go get it done."
Social Behavior & Self-Esteem	"Don't talk back to me, stay in a child's place."	"You better stop acting like you grown."
Comparison & Internalized Racism	"Why can't you be more like [sibling/cousin]?"	"You acting white."
Money & Work Ethic	"Ain't nobody gonna take care of you but you."	"You need to get a real job instead of chasing dreams."
Gender Expectations	"You need to learn how to cook, or you'll never get a man."	"Boys don't play with dolls."

Common Negative Things Black People Say About Each Other & Their Impact on Mental Health		
Category	Common Negative Statements	Mental Health Impact
Success & Achievement	"You think you better than us now?"	Imposter Syndrome – Makes Black individuals feel guilty for achieving success, causing self-doubt and reluctance to celebrate their wins.

Education & Speech	“You talk white.”	Identity Crisis & Shame – Makes Black people feel like they have to choose between their racial identity and academic or professional success.
Mental Health & Emotions	“Black people don’t get depressed.” / “Therapy is for white people.”	Emotional Suppression – Leads to untreated anxiety, depression, and reluctance to seek help.
Skin Color & Colorism	“You too dark.” / “You light-skinned, so you think you cute.”	Low Self-Esteem – Reinforces colorism , causing people to feel either too dark or not “Black enough,” leading to body dysmorphia and self-hate.
Hair & Beauty Standards	“Your hair too nappy.” / “That wig/weave look bad.”	Body Image Issues – Promotes Eurocentric beauty standards, making Black people feel unattractive in their natural state.
Masculinity & Vulnerability	“Man up.” / “You acting soft.”	Toxic Masculinity – Teaches Black men to suppress emotions, leading to difficulty expressing feelings and higher risks of suicide and emotional detachment .
Femininity & Gender Roles	“Ain’t nobody gonna want you if you don’t cook/clean.”	Gender Pressure & Relationship Struggles – Creates unrealistic expectations for Black women and men, making relationships more transactional.
Financial Struggles	“You broke.” / “You still living with your mama?”	Shame & Financial Anxiety – Puts pressure on Black individuals to keep up with materialistic standards, even when they can’t afford to.
Community Violence & Survival	“Snitches get stitches.”	Fear & Mistrust – Discourages people from reporting crime or seeking help, fostering cycles of violence and unaddressed trauma.
Generational Differences	“These young kids are lost.” / “Old heads	Divisiveness & Disconnection – Creates a rift between older and younger generations,

	don't understand nothing.”	preventing knowledge-sharing and community growth.
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III. How Thoughts Become “Wired” in the Brain

The brain has a remarkable capacity called neuroplasticity, which means it can form new connections and change its structure in response to experiences and mental practices. When we repeatedly think in a certain way, networks of neurons in our brain fire in that pattern over and over. Over time, those neural connections become stronger and more efficient – the brain is essentially building a road that the next thought can travel more easily. In simple terms, “neurons that fire together, wire together.”

At first, the new thought might feel forced or not entirely believable – that’s normal. But with consistent practice, your brain will build new neural pathways to support the healthier belief. Over time, the new pathway can become the default, and the old pathway can shrink from disuse. Every time you catch a distortion and reframe it – you are physically reshaping your brain. Through this lens, a mental stronghold is not an unbreakable fortress, but a well-worn neural pathway. You can tear down the walls by building new pathways around it, brick by brick.

IV. The Process of Renewing the Mind: Challenging and Replacing Negative Thoughts using the “3 C’s: Catch it, Check it, Change it”

- 1. Catch it – Identify the distorted thought. Acknowledging the trauma (instead of ignoring it).** The first step is to **notice the negative thought** or belief that is causing distress. Pause and pay attention to what thought is occurring in upsetting situations. For example, if you feel a sudden wave of anxiety or sadness, ask: *“What was going through my mind just now?”* Write down the thought, no matter how automatic or believable it seems. Simply acknowledging the thought (“I’ll never succeed at this”) is vital, because you can’t change what you haven’t identified. Keeping a thought journal can help connect triggering situations, the belief or thought that arose, and the feelings or actions that followed. This builds awareness of your mental habits.

V. Individual Activity/Assignment – Questions for Reflection

1. Deception: Write down a negative thought you have about yourself, or something negative a close relative or friend said to you.
2. Distraction: What emotion does it fall under?
 - Choose from fear, guilt, shame, insecurity
 - ❖ **1 Corinthians 13:4-7** – *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."*

Presenter: *Dr. Jamie Freeny*

References

Winning the War in Your Mind: Change Your Thinking, Change Your Life by Craig Groeschel

DeGruy, J. A. (2017). *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Revised ed.). Joy DeGruy Publications Inc. ISBN: 978-0985217273.

[Mental Health Among African Americans: Innovations in Research and Practice](#) (Lexington Books, 2019).

American Psychiatric Association's [fact sheet on mental health disparities among African Americans](#)

Resources

WVUMC Congregational Care Dept. Contact - Genniveive (Gennie) Brown at (713) 726-2597 or Manager@counselingmail.com

[Black Psychiatry Directory](https://blackpsychiatrydirectory.com/) - <https://blackpsychiatrydirectory.com/>

[Therapy for Black Girls](https://therapyforblackgirls.com/) - <https://therapyforblackgirls.com/>

[Therapy for Black Men](https://therapyforblackmen.org/) - <https://therapyforblackmen.org/>

[Mental Health America of Greater Houston](https://mhahouston.org/mental-health-resources/) - <https://mhahouston.org/mental-health-resources/>

The Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD (Harris County Mental Health Authority) - <https://www.theharriscenter.org/>

Jamie Freeny DrPH, MPH - jfreeny@gmail.com