

Head-Chatter Verses Thinking for Stress Reduction

Brendan Lloyd PhD, June 2018

We are likely to notice the *feelings* of stress, anxiety or depression. On the other hand we are not so likely to notice the part our mind plays in creating those feeling.

If you have an interest in stress-reduction then there is good reason to understand the difference between 'head-chatter' and 'thinking'. Thinking and head-chatter have quite different functions. They are not the same thing.

I define thinking as a deliberate attempt to bring about an adaptation of some kind. In other words, thinking is mainly conscious and purposeful. In this sense it is in the present. With thinking we are creating, solving, planning, completing, letting-go, etc. With head-chatter we are most likely looping on the unresolvable or the unachievable.

Thinking is something that we do on purpose. The head-chatter is sneaky. It will sneak up on us. We will find ourselves in it. We will not go there on purpose. Yet we are drawn in to it. In this sense I characterise head-chatter as seductive. It sucks us in.

We can easily be sucked-in to the head-chatter because it somehow feels right. It is at least familiar. It is often the same old story or at least from a collection of same old stories. Also, and very often, our head-chatter has that seductive element of truth. In other words there is content in the head-chatter that we just can't let go of.

Head-chatter so often feels like thinking. It seems as though we are working on something. Because of the apparent truth in the head-chatter we can get caught up in being right. Or we can be caught up in our justifications for our anger and pass on blame. Or we can be caught up in self-deprecation or shame or resentment.

To understand the importance of the head-chatter it helps to understand the mind-body connection. In simple terms, our body does what it's told. The instructions come from our mind. The issue with head-chatter is that we don't need

to be conscious of what our mind is doing for it to stress our body. In other words, it will have its effect whether we are aware of it or not.

When I say "mind-body" connection I am referring to observable events. For example, if our mind wanders into images or ideas of a challenging nature then we are quite likely to feel something in our body; most likely in our gut or chest area. This feeling is there because of an adrenalin release.

If you have feelings of anxiety or panic then what you have is elevated adrenalin in your body. There is only one reason for our body to release adrenalin; that is our mind has a perception of threat in its sights. The emergency button is activated regardless of the truth or otherwise of the perception. In other words, the emergency button will be activated even if the threat is a perceptual distortion.

Our mind needs only a perception of threat for our body to activate the emergency button. A perception of threat is a real threat as far as our body is concerned. Our body just does what it's told and responds to the perception.

Our body will not question the validity of the perception. Nor will our body test for perceptual-distortions or unrelenting-expectations as the true nature of the threat. No, our body will just release the adrenaline and cortisol as instructed.

If we keep on hitting on the emergency button, long enough without sufficient rest, then we end up with elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol. Stress-symptoms, including anxiety and or depression, are the inevitable outcome from the ongoing exposure to these emergency chemicals (hormones).

The threat we express in our head-chatter is a perceptual distortion at the very least. In other words there is no objective reason to activate the emergency button. For example, you could be brushing your teeth when something pops into

your mind and then you notice a wave of anxiety go through your body. Objectively you probably don't need the adrenalin at that time at all, just to brush your teeth.

In the example above the head-chatter's content could be about a social *faux pas* from the night before. The adrenalin comes from the initial perception of threat. The threat is expressed through the content of the head-chatter. "You idiot", you tell yourself.

Now if that's all there was just that one little bang on the emergency button, then the adrenalin would pass and wear off very quickly. The trouble is we don't leave it alone. We go into it. We can feed it. We can gnaw on it. As a result we keep on the emergency button. We end up stressed. If we keep it going long enough we end up suffering anxiety and or depression.

We get on the emergency button because of a perceived threat. This in itself is not remarkable. What is remarkable is our ability to get off the emergency button in a timely manner before the damage is done. If only we could do that then stress-reduction would be easy.

The head-chatter just keeps hitting on the emergency button. Sometimes it's like our head's in a loop. Or like a pair of sand shoes clunking away in the clothes drier.

We have difficulty seeing the un-resolvability or un-achievability of the head-chatter's content. With the head-chatter there is the potential to be bogged down in the content with no resolution in sight or even possible. Our body needs some sort of resolution coming from our mind to get off the emergency button. To get off the emergency button we need some way to defuse the head-chatter.

But we get stuck in the loop. The adrenalin is a driving force. With each adrenalin release as our head-chatter loops we are driven harder to search for the resolution for the unresolvable.

For example, if you have the ability to recognise the head-chatter and immediately let it go, then you're on to something. But as I said before the head-chatter is seductive, it sucks us in; and we're driven by the adrenalin. It's not easy to just let it go on the face of it. We sometimes need a bit of finessing to defuse our most persistent head-

chatter.

There is much to learn from our head-chatter and how it works.

We do not need to ask why we have head-chatter. For starters to ask 'why' does not address the issue of how to get off the emergency button. Secondly, why-questions are quite often a feature of head-chatter. What we don't want in our lives is more head-chatter that comes out of the original head-chatter.

In the articles ahead we will go further into the nature of the head-chatter, how it works, and how to defuse it. Ultimately we need the mind skills to defuse the head-chatter to get off the emergency button.

Please now go on to read articles numbered 2 and 3. These are the articles titled...

- *02 Three-Minute Breathing Meditation.*
- *03 The Stress Model for Stress Reduction*