



Why your thoughts just want to break free?

Mark Tyrrell

Why suppressing thoughts (and feelings) doesn't work

We all know about the pink elephant phenomenon. As soon as I say “Don’t think about a pink elephant!” you are instantly *more* likely to think about a pink elephant. (You just did, didn’t you!)

This is not just folklore, either. Back in 1987, research conducted by Richard Wenzler and Daniel Wegner ⁽¹⁾ found that people who were instructed to suppress a thought were *twice as likely* to think about it as those who were free to think about it if they chose.

It seems to be stress that makes us more likely to fail at thought suppression.

There’s a famous episode from the classic British TV sitcom *Fawlty Towers* in which Basil Fawlty becomes obsessed about the risk of upsetting some German guests staying at his hotel by accidentally mentioning the war.

But of course the more he frets and tries to avoid any war references by saying to himself and going around ordering his staff “Don’t mention the war!”, the more often it slips out. Much to the bafflement of his German visitors.

But you can understand how Basil feels.

If someone says to you: “Don’t look now, but isn’t that the man who was so rude to you?” You’ll feel pretty *compelled* to look, won’t you? To which your friend might respond: “I *told* you not to look!”

The point is that *forcing* ourselves not to look at or think about something flags it up as ‘important’ and worthy of attention. Which is to say, it raises the stress level associated with that thing.

And the more stressed we are about something, the more suppression of it will backfire.

And the more *aware* we are that we are *trying* to suppress something, the more it tends to want to see the light of day.

A study at the University of California in 2006 observed precisely this phenomenon in action. Participants were more likely to give a fact away when they were *specifically* told to keep it secret than when they were given no such instruction. ⁽²⁾

So trying to fight something that has emotional resonance for you is not likely to be hugely successful. When the conscious rational mind tries too hard to function in a very particular way, while all your *unconscious* emotional drivers are pushing you in the opposite direction, the power of the unconscious will win out every time.

It's not just thoughts

This phenomenon goes beyond troubling thoughts. For example, trying to make yourself go to sleep seldom works if you are very anxious or angry about something, or, indeed, if you are too anxious about your need to sleep itself.

Trying hard not to smoke when you really really want to is also not much different from Basil Fawlty trying not to mention the war.

When we treat smokers with hypnotherapy, we want them to get to a point where smoking has *lost all interest* for them and, in a sense, become alien, so that there is no longer any need to try not to think about it. Nobody spends much time thinking about things they're completely indifferent to!

I don't want an ex-smoker to be *trying* not to think about cigarettes. I want them to feel that the whole subject has become dull and irrelevant and that they've moved on. Not by *trying to convince themselves* this is true but by *feeling that it is true*.

If Basil had had no interest in the war, and whether it was right to mention it or not, he would have been much less likely to think about it and therefore keep blurting it out and going on about it.

Another bit of intriguing (and, I have to say, rather fun-sounding!) research found that forbidden love, or at least forbidden flirting, was more compelling than out-in-the-open flirting. ⁽³⁾

In one part of this study, participants were instructed to play footsie with a stranger during a card game. The twist was that some pairs were specifically told to *hide* their under-the-table-foot flirting, while others weren't.

The results showed that playing *secret* footsie made people feel more attracted to each other than blatant, out-in-the-open footsie. When they tried to suppress their attraction, or at least pretend it wasn't happening, it actually came back stronger.

Again, you can link this to what happens with smoking – or any other compulsion – which can feel like a guilty or secret pleasure. People even talk about going for a ‘crafty cigarette’. *Secret* bingeing on sweet foods or cigarettes may make those behaviours *more* compelling.

This understanding underpins a hypnotic technique we sometimes use with people who want to stop smoking, bingeing, or some other compulsive behaviour. We have them hypnotically experience carrying out their compulsion while all their loved ones are watching them. This can help them remove the sense of secret compulsion from their behaviour and help make it feel less appealing.

The role of emotion

So the more you consciously try to push away a thought that keeps wanting to be heard, the more it screams at you for attention, and even more so if there is a *strong emotion* attached to it. I might try to kid myself that I’m not terrified or angry, but the more I try to suppress the truth, from myself and others, the more my terror or anger will scream to make itself heard.

Trying not to giggle isn’t as effective a treatment for uncontrolled giggling as being *encouraged* to giggle. In psychotherapeutic jargon this is known as ‘paradoxical intervention’. Somehow, when it’s okay to giggle, or if it’s actively *encouraged*, it loses its compulsiveness.

It’s the same when we try not to blush or pretend we aren’t blushing. On the rare occasions that I blush, I’ve noticed that actively drawing other people’s attention to the blush seems to get rid of it rather quickly. It’s as if bringing it out into the open somehow dissipates the need.

We also tend to get emotional about things that stir our prejudices. Trying to ‘say the right thing’ in order to be politically correct has been shown to make us more likely to reveal our racism, homophobia or whatever. A study carried out in 1994 found that people prejudiced against white supremacists (and yes, you might think that a fair enough prejudice!) displayed *more* evident disgust for the supremacists if they were told to *try* to appear neutral around them rather than to behave naturally. So *trying* to appear okay with something or someone when we’re not may actually make us behave *less favourably* towards them.

And that’s why telling someone “Be nice!” before you take them to see someone they loathe doesn’t always work.

But what *might* work in such an instance?

What works

Well, if you ask someone to notice likable or sympathetic qualities in someone they don't like, then you are, in effect, asking them to pay attention, at least for that time, to the more positive, human qualities of that individual. Even the worst person in the world has positive qualities and suffers from human frailty.

So it could be more effective to say something like: "I know you don't like Auntie Beatrice much, but she has had a really hard time with being so ill recently and she is looking forward to seeing you." than to say: "I know you don't like Auntie Beatrice but will you please act nice and at least *pretend* you like her!!"

The difference is that, instead of asking them to pretend to feelings that they don't have, you are asking them to notice in what ways the person they dislike merits sympathy. You don't have to like someone to behave sympathetically towards them.

And, in fact, it's often when people are *pretending* to like us that we sense that they *don't* like us (not that that happens to me too often, of course! 😊).

Honesty isn't always the best policy

Now the principle that trying to suppress a feeling is likely to make it worse doesn't mean we should be emotionally incontinent and express *all* our true feelings *all* the time.

Imagine the chaos!

If we always express how we feel about everything, we very quickly lose perspective. Not all situations are about us and the way we feel.

If some child is shrieking in the street I might indeed feel very strongly that I want to yell at them to shut up... but I might also need to maintain some level of mutually respectful relationship with the parent. So I suppress that urge. That's fine. It doesn't go on forever. And we are *supposed* to be able to suppress urges *sometimes* for the common good. Moreover, suppressing unhelpful thoughts and emotions *in the moment* is often essential to efficiency. But if we *continually* suppress them, that's when the trouble starts, and something will give eventually.

I believe it's important to remember that we need to acknowledge the way we feel and not pretend we don't feel like that. Being low in mood or feeling down isn't helped by *pretending* we are not down. When we *acknowledge* that we are not feeling too awesome then we can do something about it.

Mindfulness and relaxation

The practice of 'mindfulness' – observing and accepting your thoughts and feelings – can be a great way to avoid getting caught in the suppression trap. When you practice mindfulness, in meditation or in a hypnotic session, you can accept thoughts and feelings without judging them and also without becoming over-identified with them. You are not your thoughts or feelings, any more than the visitors to a house are the house itself.

Trying to suppress thoughts and feelings is like trying to stop a pan of water boiling over by holding down the lid, when what you really need to do is turn down the temperature. If we can turn down the 'emotional temperature' of our more troublesome feelings, then we don't need to employ ongoing thought suppression. This is because when we relax about something it's no longer such an issue.

If Basil Fawlty had relaxed about having German guests in his hotel he wouldn't have felt any need to make special efforts to avoid mentioning the war.

We use hypnosis and relaxation training to help people relax *while* they are having troublesome thoughts rather than trying to *stop* the troublesome thoughts.

For example, if I am treating someone whose worst fear is to make a mistake when public speaking, I might get them to relax deeply while *imagining* making a mistake. This might seem paradoxical, but when we reach a point where they feel more *relaxed* about the possibility of making errors in front of their audience, then of course they are more likely not to worry about it – and therefore they are less likely to actually make the mistakes that they feared making.

A similar approach works with hypochondriacs. Hypochondria is a morbid destructive use of the imagination. I tell them that anyone can imagine anything, but it's how you *feel when* you imagine it that's the important. If you can imagine getting ill but feel reasonably calm and detached while you are daydreaming your way through this scenario, then you are no longer 'buying into' what your imagination is doing. And so you don't have to try so hard to avoid such thoughts.

Once you do this you are no longer avoiding the issue, and the 'elephant in the room' turns into a little mouse that quietly scurries off and leaves you in peace.

So, science and common sense tell us that secret romances, whether with a person or a substance like tobacco, can be more compelling; that trying not to mention something or think about something focuses your attention on it all the more; and now I'm telling

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you that the way to counteract this is to learn new ways to think and feel about what you wanted to avoid, so that it no longer looms so large in your consciousness.

Mark Tyrrell

Notes:

- (1) Richard M. Wenzlaff and Daniel M. Wegner, '[Thought Suppression](#)', *Annual Reviews: Psychology*. 2000. 51:59-91.
- (2) Liane Wardlow Lane, Michelle Groisman, and Victor S. Ferreira, '[Don't Talk About Pink Elephants! : Speakers' Control Over Leaking Private Information During Language Production.](#)' *Psychological Science*. 2006 April; 17(4): 273–277.
- (3) Wegner, Daniel M.; Lane, Julie D.; Dimitri, Sara, '[The allure of secret relationships.](#)' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 66(2), Feb 1994, 287-300.

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