

Relationship Success: It's All In Your Head

By Anne Brunette, MSW

We've all heard the comment, whether spoken to us or about someone else, "It's all in your head". Usually, it's referring to some problem that it's assumed we've created in our mind. The assumption is that our thinking is controlling whatever is happening to us.

When it comes to our marriage, (or any relationship for that matter) what's in our head—our thoughts—does have a significant impact on the success of that relationship. The good news is that we can learn to change our thoughts and in turn, change our behavior. We can do this regardless of what the other person does.

A good illustration of this is if you can think back to a time that a light bulb went on for you. It may have been something you realized about yourself or someone else. You may have started looking at the same situation differently. Most likely, your change in thought changed your attitude and your behavior followed. If you really had a meaningful thought and behavior change, someone else may have even changed their response to you. So you see; thoughts can have a huge impact on relationships.

You might be asking, "How can I use this to change MY relationship in a positive way?" Start by understanding how powerful thoughts can be. Remember back to the early days of your relationship. If your partner was late for a date, you probably gave him the benefit of the doubt. You may have rationalized that he got caught in traffic, had an emergency at work, or was stopping to get you flowers. (Okay, a girl can hope!)

As relationships progress, it is easy to focus on the negative and begin to be harder on your spouse or partner instead of focusing on the positive. You may interpret that same event (your partner being late) in a negative way. For example, you could assume that he stopped for a beer, that he cares more about work than about you, or that he is just selfish.

Pay Attention to Your Thinking

The next step to thinking your way to a better relationship is to notice your assumption about your spouse's intentions now. Do you give her the benefit of the doubt or are you critical in your thoughts? Once you begin to pay attention to these thoughts, you can put them to the test. Ask yourself: Are you interpreting her behavior negatively? For example, do you assume that your partner really means, "You are not a good provider" when she says, "I don't think we can afford that right now"?

If you buy into those thoughts and hold them in, your thoughts become increasingly negative and your behavior will follow. You will likely be more irritable, short, or withdrawn from your spouse if you allow these thoughts to fester. Over time, negative interpretations left unaddressed can slowly kill a relationship.

Challenge and Change Your Thinking

Recognizing your thoughts is a great way to start. Next you need to both challenge and change your thoughts. Is there evidence to suggest that your partner means what you think he means? Could he mean something else? Open yourself to the possibility that your interpretation could be wrong. Once you open yourself up, think about other, more positive, possibilities about why your partner did what he did.

Do Something Different

Finally, it is time to take those positive thoughts and do something with them. For example, ask your husband what he meant by what he said. Share the assumption you made and ask if it was correct. You may find that

what you thought he meant and what he really meant are very different things. You could save yourself from needless anger, disappointment, and potentially damaging actions toward your spouse.

WORD OF CAUTION

Changing your interpretations of your partner's intentions does not mean rationalizing cruel, hurtful or abusive behavior. If your partner does things to purposefully hurt you physically or emotionally and you have addressed these issues without any change, seek professional help to keep yourself safe.

The Rewards

For change to happen, start with yourself and your thinking, check out your thoughts with your partner, get feedback, and then change your behavior. It takes hard work to have a great relationship, but you may be amazed at how fast the relationship can improve just by changing what's in your head!

Negative Interpretations

Consistently assuming that the intentions of someone's behavior is negative

Forms of Negative Interpretations

Hearing things more negatively than is intended
Believing the worst instead of the best in another
Seeing what you expect to see

According to Markman and Stanley, marital researchers and authors of 12 Hours to A Great Marriage and PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program), making negative interpretations is a danger sign in marriage that can erode positive feelings over time and potentially destroy relationships.

Resource:

12 Hours To A Great Marriage by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, Susan Blumberg, Natalie Jenkins and Carol Whiteley