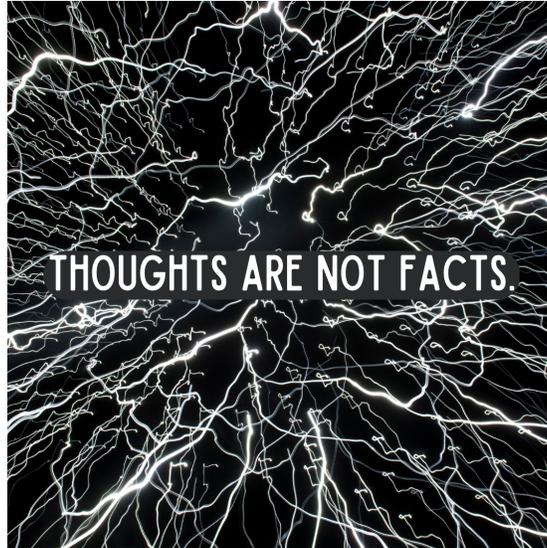


Thoughts are NOT Facts

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Sarah here. We hope that you found last week's blog on parenting role models and influences helpful. This week, we're focusing on a topic that Lisa and I work with most of our patients (and their parents) on. It's a simple but powerful concept: the idea that thoughts are not facts.



This may seem like a pretty obvious point. I mean, you could *think* about a pink spotted giraffe, but just thinking about it doesn't make it real, right? But what about thoughts you have *about yourself* or *about someone else*. When you think "I'm a horrible singer" or "I can't cook" or "My child is bad," those thoughts may not *seem* absurd, the way that a pink spotted giraffe does. They *seem* like they could be true, especially in the moment when you think them.

Part of the "it feels true" factor is that when we think something, we "hear it" in our heads. It's like we're saying the words to ourselves. And the way we talk to ourselves when we're thinking something sounds an awful lot like the way we talk when we're stating facts. To highlight this point, read these two sentences:

I am 5 foot 2 inches tall.

I am a bad artist.

Both sentences are structured the same- they both start with “I am...” and they include a description. In the first sentence, it’s a fact about my height. In the second sentence, it’s a thought I’ve had about myself in the past. Even though only the first sentence is a fact, both sentences read as if they’re literal truths.

Now read these two fictitious (not about me/my child) sentences:

My child is 12 years old.

My child hates me.

The first sentence is a statement of fact about the child, while the second is a thought that could have shown up at a time when the child and parent were arguing. But again, the sentences are structured the same and both sentences sound like facts.

So, why is this important? The way you talk *to* yourself and *about* yourself matters! When your thoughts sound like facts, it’s really easy to forget that they aren’t actually facts. And that means you’re very likely to believe everything your mind tells you. So, if you’re having a bad day or you’re struggling in a relationship or you’re feeling a dip in your confidence, the negative self-talk you experience is more likely to be accepted without question.



Here's the good news: this is *totally* something you can work on. And, even better, it's something you and your family can work on together. If you want to stop believing every thought that comes to mind, the first thing you have to do is recognize when you're thinking! To do that, you and your family can practice labeling thoughts as thoughts. So, instead of saying "Ugh! I'm so stupid!" when you've made a mistake, you would say "Ugh! I'm having the thought that I'm so stupid!" or "Ugh! Right now, I think I'm so stupid" or "Ugh! When I made a mistake, my mind told me that I'm so stupid!" The point of the exercise is to literally label thoughts as thoughts.

This can be an amusing activity to do together- *as long as everyone is on board*. You can gently prompt each other when someone says a thought as if it's a fact. For example, if you said, "I can't do this!" in a moment of frustration, your child or co-parent could prompt you to label your thoughts as thoughts. That may help you shift to "I think I can't do this" or "It feels like I can't do this." When we label our thoughts, the sentences do sound a little awkward and funny, which is totally okay. That helps take some of the power away from them. And we're modeling this strategy and working on it as a family, which can feel really good (so no one feels like it's "just them" that has this struggle).

By changing the way you talk about yourself aloud, you'll be more cognizant of how you talk to yourself in your own head. And, by labeling thoughts, you're creating some natural distance between yourself and your thoughts. Over time, this process becomes more automatic and can even help you shift your way of thinking. So, get labeling and see where it takes you (and your family)!