



FIVE WAYS OUR THOUGHTS HIJACK US ... AND HOW TO SAY HELLO



by Carolyn Spring

We'd set up at the venue yesterday ahead of a couple of training days today and tomorrow, and were heading over to our hotel. We got in the van and Andy clicked the satnav on. 'It's only 365 yards away!' he laughed. 'We could have walked.'

He was right (he often is), but we had cases and clothes hangers and stuff, and anyway I didn't fancy walking 365 yards UP the hill the next morning. Training two days solid is hard enough work as it is without that kind of silliness, for goodness' sake!

So we headed off. Less than one minute later, following the satnav, we were stuck in a dead-end. Someone built a shopping centre in the middle of Bradford and forgot to tell our satnav. We turned around. 'Left?' Andy asked. 'I reckon so,' I replied. Turned left. No entry. Two streets later, and we were nearly back where we started. 'Probably this way.' And we found

a main road (hurrah!) and we joined the rush hour traffic and around 20 minutes later we eventually reached the hotel – the hotel that was only 365 yards away. Grr.

I've noticed that this happens a lot in life. We get an idea of where we're going, we set off, things get in the way, we take a few wrong turns, the advice we get stinks, we crawl along not making much progress, and eventually we reach our original destination. Just later than we'd planned. A lot later.

As we were driving along in the van, someone (it may have been me – I don't recall) quipped, 'At least we get to see the sights of Bradford!' Apologies to the locals, but it was meant ironically. But we did all deal with it in good humour, no one got stressed, and I at least used it as an opportunity to talk at my team for a while

longer on my latest, greatest hotshot ideas. Yes, please do feel sorry for them.

There was a time, though – not such an age ago – when I would have handled it very differently. I would have interpreted it all through a different lens. For example:

1. ***I'm so stupid.*** I should thought to check for updates on the satnav. I should have checked it out on Google Maps. I should have insisted that we turn *right* at the top of that road, rather than allowing us to turn *left*. I should have known where we were going. It's my fault and I'm stupid.

2. ***The world is against me.*** Why does everything always go wrong? Why can't I even make a simple 365-yard journey without problems and difficulties? Haven't I got enough to deal with, without people conspiring to build shopping centres and block my routes? Everything I do goes wrong. The world is out to get me.

3. ***I can't cope with this.*** I've got an appointment at 7pm and I've got to get back to the hotel and get something to eat and get showered and unpack and check for late bookers or late cancellers and I've still got to go through my notes for tomorrow and everything is too much and there isn't time to do everything and it's all too too too too much and I can't cope.

4. ***Everything always goes wrong.*** I knew it was a mistake to start doing training. Whenever I move forwards, I always get pushed back. It's like the opposite of the Midas touch – everything I try to do explodes. I shouldn't be trying to do this kind of thing, because it always goes wrong. What's the point even trying?

5. ***This will happen next time too.*** This was a disaster, and it could have been even worse. Imagine if we were in Birmingham or Manchester or London and the satnav was faulty. We might never have found our hotel. We could have been going round in circles for hours. Then I wouldn't have got to bed in time and I would have been too tired to deliver the training. I can't risk this happening again. We mustn't do any more training in cities we don't know well.

Are any of those thought patterns familiar to anyone? The self-blame, the paranoia, the overwhelm, the meaning-making, the catastrophising?

I lived like this until well into my thirties. These thought patterns were my loyal companions, always by my side. I was all scrunched up within myself, with the narrowest of windows of tolerance, just waiting for life to shatter. I worried incessantly. I interpreted everything through a catastrophic lens. I hated myself, I feared everything, I beat myself up, I gnawed on myself with anxiety.

It's an intensely painful way to live.



The first thing that made a difference, that started to shift things? It was **Daniel Siegel's book** *Mindsight*.

He talks about observing your thoughts, sitting in the middle of your 'hub of awareness' in the centre of your mind, and watching these thoughts as they come and go on the rim. He talked about thoughts being *just thoughts*. Just thoughts! Here it comes – a thought! And now it's gone! It occurred to me how often in the course of a day I lose my train of thought, forgot what I was about to say or what I was about to do, and that Dan is right and our thoughts come and go, ebb and flow, and we can just notice them. We don't need to *believe* them, and we don't need to *act on them*.

It was a revolution for me. It took time to change my habits. (And it always seems to take longer for me to change something than I think it will, or than it should.) But I began to be able to 'just notice' that I was thinking that the world is going to end. I could just watch the thought, observe it, wave at it. And eventually it would be replaced with another thought (especially if I was proactive in taking charge of my mind and deliberately thinking a different thought), and then it wouldn't be there any more.

Huh.

Now I'm finishing this blog post and I'm noticing that there's a stream of thoughts trickling through my mind that it's not good enough, that it doesn't hang together well enough, that maybe I should just press CTRL-A and then DELETE. Because I'm no good, I can't write, no one will want to read what I've written.

Just thoughts. There they are, separate to me, out on the rim. And I'm sitting in the hub and I can smile at them, because they're like old friends, I've heard them so often. And I just wave them on their way and get back to editing the third paragraph.

When you think an anxious thought, what do you do with it? Do you fight it? Do you believe it? Does it snowball and flatten you in its path? Or do you just notice it, smile at it and wave it on its way?

If you're anything like me, it will take time to change old habits. Because here I go again – *It shouldn't have taken so long, I've wasted half my life being messed up!* – and I just notice and I smile and I wave it on its way.

Now, what was I doing? Oh yes, I was writing a blog...

