

Calm Living Blueprint Podcast

Episode 4: How to Unhook Yourself From Your Thoughts
Candice Esposito



This morning I held a fresh lemon in my hands. I ran my fingers over the bright yellow skin, noting all the little dimples. I lifted it to my nose and inhaled the delicious lemony aroma. Then I placed it on a cutting board and sliced it in half. I picked up one of the halves and squeezed it, allowing the lemon juice to drop into a glass of warm water.

What happened as you listened to my description of the lemon? Did you see its shape and color? Could you feel the texture of its skin? Maybe you smelled the fresh lemony scent? Maybe your mouth even began to water.

And yet there was no lemon in front of you. Only words about a lemon in your ears. Once those words entered your head you reacted to them almost as you would to a real lemon.

The words became thoughts. Thoughts are words and pictures inside our head.

Fascinating thing, these thoughts, eh?

How many thoughts does your mind create in the space of just one day?

I'd guess hundreds upon thousands probably. And it never runs out, does it? Your mind always has something to say or something to show you.

And you've probably also noticed that your mind has a tendency to be negative.

So what do we do when those negative thoughts impact our behaviour or hold us back from doing the things we want to do?

For example, having the thought, "I have nothing to say" may lead to avoiding social situations or trying to get out of a social situation. Having the thought, "I blush too much" may lead to trying to hide your face.

So how do we deal with these negative or uncomfortable thoughts and prevent them from ruining our lives?

That's what today's episode is about. So keep listening to find out.

Calm Living Blueprint Podcast

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Hi I'm Candice Esposito, founder of Calm Living Blueprint. Welcome to episode four of the Calm Living Blueprint Podcast. Thanks for listening.

Let's start with a simple fact: The human mind has evolved to think negatively.

Why? Well, think back to our primitive ancestors. They had four basic needs: food, water, shelter and sex. Of course, none of those things are important if you are dead. So the number one job in their mind was to keep from getting killed – to survive.

How does a mind do that? It looks for danger. It constantly scans the environment, trying to spot anything that could possibly hurt you.

Bears, wolves, sabertooth tigers, avalanches, volcanoes, rival tribes – if you were fearless and carefree you probably wouldn't last too long. You would have been trampled, eaten or murdered pretty quickly, long before you had a chance to reproduce.

That's our history. So our modern brains to a large extent still try to anticipate what could hurt us, always trying to predict what could go wrong. Doubts, worries, fears – they are all a natural by-product of evolution.

And that's why, no matter how hard we try to think positively, we can't stop our minds from generating negative thoughts.

So be wary of any self-help books or programs that claim stuff like "erasing old memories" or "eliminating negative core beliefs" because it doesn't happen. The latest research in neuroscience tells us that our brains do not eliminate old neural pathways. Our brains lay down new ones on top of the old ones.

The more you use the new neural pathways the more habitual your new patterns of thinking become.

It's kind of like cutting a new path through a forest. The more the new pathway is used the more established it becomes. But the old path is still

Calm Living Blueprint Podcast

Episode 4: How to Unhook Yourself From Your Thoughts
Candice Esposito



there. It gets used less often, the grass may grow over top, but it's still there.

Or you can think of it this way ... it's like learning to speak a new language. No matter how fluent you become in the new language your old language doesn't disappear.

And if that's not enough to convince you let me tell you this ancient Zen parable:

One day a newbie, someone just starting to learn Zen, asks one of the head monks, "Master, how do I find the greatest Zen master in the whole land?"

The monk thinks for a moment then says, "Find the person who tells you he or she has eliminated all negative thoughts. And if you find such a person, you'll know that's NOT who you're looking for."

In other words even the greatest Zen masters have negative thoughts.

Our minds are pretty amazing. They help us plan for the future, to learn from the past. They allow us to communicate, to contribute, to improve, to invent, to create and adapt.

Our minds are also quick to judge and criticize, to come up with scary stories about the future, to dredge up painful memories from the past, to remind us of our flaws and failures. To compare us unfavourably to others.

And that's all normal. Those are all the processes of a normal human mind.

What we want to look at though is how to handle those inevitable negative thoughts.

I want you to try this with me ...

I'm going to say three incomplete sentences and I want you to notice what words automatically pop into your head at the end of each sentence.

Okay, here they are:

Children should be seen and not ...

Calm Living Blueprint Podcast

Episode 4: How to Unhook Yourself From Your Thoughts
Candice Esposito



Mary had a little ...

Blondes have more ...

What happened? I'm guessing that the words "heard," "lamb," and "fun" popped into your head.

Now, do you believe that children should be seen and not heard? Or that there really was a girl named Mary who had a little lamb that followed her to school? Or that blondes really do have more fun than people with other hair colors?

I'm betting no.

So eliminate all of those word sequences from your mind. Get rid of them. Under no circumstances allow those words to pop back into your head.

Could you do that?

No, of course not. In a context where someone says, "Blondes have more" the word "fun" is going to pop into your head.

And, just like heard, lamb and fun, negative thoughts pop up whenever we encounter a challenging situation. As soon as we think about stepping outside of our comfort zone our minds come up with the same old stories ... "You'll fail." "You're not good enough." "It's too hard."

All these stories come under the big story of "I can't do it."

I had a "can't do it" story. I told myself, "I can't do it because I have nothing interesting to say. I'm not good enough to talk to those people."

All of us have some version of an "I can't do it" story.

Most of us respond to this story in one of three ways:

- A) Challenge the thought and look for evidence to prove it's not true
- B) Replace the thought with more positive thoughts
- C) Distract yourself from the thought

Calm Living Blueprint Podcast

Episode 4: How to Unhook Yourself From Your Thoughts
Candice Esposito



If you've tried any of those options you've probably noticed that they require a lot of energy and effort and even if they provide some temporary relief from the "I can't do it" story, your mind keeps on coming up with new stories.

Unfortunately a lot of the advice out there recommends choosing one of those strategies.

Me, I don't recommend any of those.

How many times have you been told that you "shouldn't be thinking that way, that winners thinking positively, that thinking that way will give you poor self-confidence?"

Maybe you've even been told that if you keep having these negative thoughts eventually they will actually come true? Or that our thoughts control our actions?

Wow, if this were true the human race would be in big trouble. I mean, how many of us have been mad at someone and had the thought of hurting them? And think of someone with OCD, obsessive compulsive disorder. Sufferers of OCD imagine that all sorts of bad things will happen: "My house will burn down. My children will die." OCD sufferers typically have thousands, if not millions, of negative thoughts, which they totally believe, yet the thoughts never manifest in reality.

Our thoughts do not control our actions. Negative thoughts aren't really the problem.

Let that one sink in a bit ... Negative thoughts aren't the problem.

Negative thoughts only become problematic when we get caught up in them, when we give them all our attention, when we believe them as the gospel truth, when we allow them to control us.

This is called fusion. It's like two sheets of metal being fused together. There is no separation between the sheets of metal just like there's no separation between ourselves and our thoughts.

Calm Living Blueprint Podcast

Episode 4: How to Unhook Yourself From Your Thoughts
Candice Esposito



When we fuse with our thoughts they have a huge influence over us.

When we defuse from our thoughts – when we separate ourselves from our thoughts – they have little to no influence on us.

Have you ever read the book, [Touching the Void](#)? If not, I highly recommend it. It's written by Joe Simpson about his true experience of getting stranded on a mountain in the Andes.

Joe was freezing cold, his right leg was broken, the knee of that leg completely shattered. Needless to say he was in agonizing pain. His climbing partner had left him for dead at the bottom of this huge crevasse.

Joe didn't think he was going to make it out alive. He never had a head full of positive thoughts like "I will make it no matter what." He was bombarded by negative thoughts.

But Joe never let those thoughts stop him. He kept taking action, kept inching his body through the snow, even as his mind told him it was useless.

It took him three whole days to get back to base camp, crawling the entire way.

If this isn't proof that our negative thoughts do not need to hold us back, I don't know what is.

You don't need to wait until you are feeling good to take action. You don't need to wait until your mind is in a positive frame to take action.

You can learn how to do things that really matter to you even when your mind tells you it's not possible.

Here's what I want you to do:

Set a goal right now – something that you will do within the next couple days that will take you completely out of your comfort zone, but something that will improve your life.

Calm Living Blueprint Podcast

Episode 4: How to Unhook Yourself From Your Thoughts
Candice Esposito



If you have access to a pen and paper or computer write down your goal right now. If not, just keep it in your head.

Something like "My commitment is to take the following action: on _____ (specify the date and time) I am going to _____ (exactly what actions you will take).

Once you've done that say your goal to yourself.

Notice what your mind says.

Make a commitment right now to also publically announce your goal to someone whose opinion really matters to you. Tell them by email, by phone, or in person

Again, notice what your mind says as I'm telling you to do this.

Obviously, I don't know what your mind is telling you right now, but I'm guessing it's giving you reasons to skip this exercise – "I can't be bothered." "I'll do it later." "It's too hard." "I can't think of anything right now."

Your mind hooks you. It hooks you into inaction.

And this has nothing to do with whether the thought is true or false. Cause I can hear you saying, "Well, what if the thought is actually true?"

If you allow the thought to guide your actions, will it help you create the life you want? (repeat)

If the answer is no then recognize the thought as being unhelpful. True or false, it doesn't matter. Acting on that thought isn't going to get you anywhere.

The good news is that even just recognizing the thought as unhelpful can lessen its influence on you.

But let's go a step further. Let's actually help you unhook yourself, untangle yourself from those thoughts.

Calm Living Blueprint Podcast

Episode 4: How to Unhook Yourself From Your Thoughts
Candice Esposito



I'm going to go over a few de-fusion techniques you can try out to discover which ones work best for you. Maybe some will seem weird to you. That's okay. I encourage you to try them out anyway and see what happens.

Okay, so bring to mind a thought that readily hooks you and pulls you away from the life you want to live. For example, a thought like "I'm not smart enough." "I'm a loser." "I'm not good enough."

Silently say this thought to yourself, believing it as much as you can and notice the effect it has on you.

Now replay the thought in your head, but this time put this short phrase immediately before it, "I'm having the thought that ...". For example, "I'm having the thought that I'm a loser."

Now replay that thought one more time, but this time insert the phrase, "I notice I'm having the thought that ...". For example, "I notice I'm having the thought that I'm a loser."

What happened? Most people get a sense of distance or separation from the thought. If this didn't happen for you, try it again with another self-judgement.

Here's another technique you can try ... this one tends to work best for people who are more visual.

Use the same self-judgement as before or use a different one if you choose.

Silently say this thought to yourself, believing it as much as you can.

Now close your eyes, imagine a computer and see this thought as words on the screen, written in simple black text.

Now play around with the font and the color of the text. Don't change the words themselves, just see them in different colors or fonts.

Now put the words back into simple black text and this time play around with the formatting – space the words out leaving large gaps between them.

Calm Living Blueprint Podcast

Episode 4: How to Unhook Yourself From Your Thoughts
Candice Esposito



Now run all the words together – no gaps between them.

Now run the words vertically down the screen, underneath each other.

Finally, put the words back into simple black text and this time add a karaoke ball, bouncing from word to word, back and forth.

What happened? Again, hopefully it helped you to separate yourself from the thought, to help you recognize the thought as just words.

One of my favourite techniques to do because it is so simple is to just thank my mind. Whatever my mind says – no matter how nasty or scary it may be – I just silently reply, “Thanks, mind.” “Thanks for sharing. Good story.” I say it with a little humour like it’s a joke only my mind and I get. It helps me detach from my thoughts.

Now, it can sometimes be easy to misunderstand the point of de-fusion. It’s not a way of getting rid of negative thoughts or a way of controlling your feelings.

To illustrate this better I want you to try this:

Raise your hands to your face, palms up, until they are covering your eyes. Look around through the gaps in between your fingers and notice how that feels.

What would it be like to go around like that all the time? How would that limit you? How would it affect your ability to interact with the world around you?

This is like fusion.

We become so engulfed in our thoughts that we lose sight of our present experience and our ability to act is impaired.

Bringing your hands back down, away from your face. How does that feel?

That is like de-fusion.

Calm Living Blueprint Podcast

Episode 4: How to Unhook Yourself From Your Thoughts
Candice Esposito



How much more information can you take in when your hands are no longer covering your eyes? How much more connected are you to the world around you?

Alright so there are two key points to de-fusion: first, to help us be present, to connect with the world around us, to fully engage in whatever we're doing. Secondly, it helps us take effective action.

Remember Joe Simpson, all alone on that mountain. Although his mind was full of negative thoughts he was present, living in the moment, continuously taking action.

Alright, so the point I want you to take away from this episode is: Negative thoughts are normal. Don't fight them. De-fuse from them. You can take action even in the midst of negative thoughts.

Here's your homeplay for this week:

The moment you notice you've been hooked by a thought, acknowledge it and use one of the techniques we went over. You can download a list of techniques, along with their instructions, in the show notes found at CalmLivingBlueprint.com/4.

Notice what happens. If you notice high expectations popping up unhook yourself by saying, "I'm having the thought that this should magically solve all my problems."

Let your mind try its best to dissuade you and then do the homeplay anyway.

Do these techniques at least 5 times per day. The more the better. And if don't use them notice how your mind talked you out of it, what reasons did it come up with, what old stories did it tell you?

Practice. And then practice some more.

And let me know how you make out by leaving me a comment on the Calm Living Facebook page at facebook.com/calmlivingblueprint.

Calm Living Blueprint Podcast

Episode 4: How to Unhook Yourself From Your Thoughts
Candice Esposito



Again, a reminder, the show notes can be found at [CalmLivingBlueprint.com/4](https://www.CalmLivingBlueprint.com/4), 4 as in episode four.

Next episode, we're going to take a bit of a break from the mind and focus a bit more on the physical. As a Naturopathic doctor, it's important to me to take a holistic approach – looking at mind, body and spirit – so the next episode we'll look at how the foods you put in your body may be contributing to symptoms of anxiety and depression or weakening your body against the effects of stress.

So you won't want to miss that.

`Til then.

I'm Candice Esposito.

Keep calm and carry on.

END TRANSCRIPT