



anxiety  
anger  
bitterness

Maybe it's anger or resentment; perhaps bitterness or constant anxiety. Thoughts that start small and seem harmless can quickly grow toxic, threatening you and everyone around you. But it doesn't have to stay that way. Whatever toxic-thoughts might hamper you, there's hope. One reader shares valuable insights on having a healthy thought-life.

I can just imagine my grandmother's horror as she returned from her brief shopping trip down the block. My mother, then seven or eight years old, was home sick. Always the creative only-child, she decided to try to bake some muffins. Remembering that her mother would preheat the oven before mixing the batter, Mom turned the oven dial "on" and set to work busily mixing muffins. What she didn't know was that her mother would also *light the pilot light* at that same time. My grandmother returned to a house reeking of gas! Running to the kitchen, she found my mother tentatively attempting to strike a match.

Luckily for everyone in her neighborhood, my mother was a little timid! My grandmother screamed, threw open all the windows, grabbed my mother and flew out of the house. I never found out if she baked the muffins.

That story recently popped from the recesses of my memory when I was struggling with my own toxic environment: in my thought life. I noted in my journal that I had allowed a toxic fog to build up in my mind and it hampered my ability to see God. Previously ignorant of this destructive process, I began to realize that by inviting in and entertaining one negative thought upon another, I had created a destructive environment that would either slowly kill my spirit or explode with the slightest provocation.

God's Spirit stirred with urgency: throw open the windows!

# What's Cooking in Your Thought Life?

by Karen Lembo



Get some fresh air! And stop repeating this poisonous process!

On more occasions than I care to remember, I have walked among the ruins of broken relationships, trying to determine what set off my anger. A sarcastic response from my daughter or some dishes left in the sink by my husband would trigger a fit of rage disproportionate to the circumstances. I would lay into one family member after another, ticking off a litany of pent up frustrations. Mommy's "shock and awe" would effectively shut down communication and leave everyone bewildered. While I might feel justified in my hissy-fit, it always left me crumpled under a pile of guilt and shame.

In the aftermath, I focused on the trigger of my anger, my daughter's "attitude," or my husband's "laziness" or "lack of appreciation." But I began to discover that the real problem was the toxic environment I had allowed build up in *my* mind. The process would begin with little annoyances and gradually escalate: "I can't believe the mess these people leave around here." "Can't anyone pick up a sock except me?" "Who do they think I am, the maid?" "I work so hard and they don't appreciate me." "If my husband loved me, he'd step in and teach them how to respect their mother. Oh, what's the use? He just doesn't love me..."

I took comfort in entertaining these seemingly harmless yet corrupting thoughts in my moments of frustration. I didn't realize the effects of my little pity parties until they eventually evolved into something more akin to out-of-control frat parties!

My explosions were inevitable because I failed to follow God's prescription for a healthy thought life. Here are some of the lessons I've learned:

- 1. Allow God to identify problems:** Humbly aware of my own weaknesses, I have committed myself to daily time in God's Word and prayer, cultivating a relationship that invites Him access to my heart and mind. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24). I may not know something is amiss, but God does. By humbly training myself to listen and obey, God faithfully alerts me to dangerous thought patterns before they build up to threatening levels.
- 2. Throw open the windows and clean out the offending thoughts:** "We take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5b). Bible study and Scripture memorization are vital to creating and maintaining a healthy thought life. God uses Scripture to help us identify corrupting thoughts and replace them with the Truth. For example, here is a verse God has often used in my times of struggle: "for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life God desires" (James 1:20). Rather than collecting ammunition and giving way to angry outbursts, His Spirit instructs me to extend grace and forgive minor aggravations before they escalate.
- 3. We must fill our minds with the "fresh air" of appropriate thoughts:** "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things" (Philippians 4:8). Like a daily dose of Febreze, praise and thanksgiving refresh my mind and help create new thought patterns that leave no trace of corruption. For example, when I am tempted to dwell on my family's faults, God reminds me to "rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Both counting my blessings and praying for my family help diffuse my anger and enable me to appropriately relate to my loved ones.

God has given us the desire to know Him and to do His will in building others up. Satan is opposed to our victory in this endeavor and will try to derail us with toxic thoughts, but as Paul wrote, "we are not unaware of his schemes" (2 Corinthians 2:11b). Therefore, as mature Christians we need to keep a close eye on our thought lives so we won't find our good intentions going up in smoke! ☁️

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