



Four Questions Four Choices

By Ken Johnston

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(Nobody likes to read this kind of stuff. We wish we didn't have to do it.)

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ISBN 1-59770-079-7

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Note: This is a condensation of a training program called “Four Questions and a Map.” If you are interested in learning more, please feel free to take the entire course by reading the book *Coping*.

Looping

Sometimes a difficult situation causes the mind to get stuck processing something over and over again — this is called “looping.” Looping on a thought can clog up the normal flow of thinking, feeling, and reacting.

Example

Joe lost his job. With two kids in college, retirement looming, and not enough savings, Joe got stuck imagining a future where he couldn’t find a job. He visualized every other disaster he could imagine, as well. His ego thought how humiliated he felt. He imagined his marriage might be ruined. He imagined that the kids would lose their education. You get the idea: looping, rushing thoughts, all bad, all disasters that he couldn’t solve — not based in reality — but they seemed real to Joe.

Example

Sally’s husband left her for another woman. She imagined all sorts of reasons, and blamed herself. She also worried about her children and what would happen to them. She knew her job skills were rusty and looped about never finding work. Again, there were all bad thoughts — not based in reality — but seeming real to Sally.

Dispute Inaccurate Thoughts and Unreasonable Assessments

Sometimes our list of thoughts contains thoughts that simply aren’t accurate.

They may be *too hopeless*, like Joe’s thought when he was laid off,
“I’ll never get another job.”

Or they could be *too broad*, like Joe’s thought,
“The layoff will ruin my life.”

Or, *taken too personally*, Sally’s thought, when her husband left her,
“I must have been an awful wife.”

It’s important to dispute thoughts that may be inaccurate, or exaggerated. The goal of making the thoughts accurate is to avoid letting inaccurate thoughts hurt you. So, collect evidence against harsh judgments or judgments that are too broad, or those that are “forever.”

When Joe examines his conclusions he will see that he has exaggerated the impact of the current job loss.

"The layoff will change my life, but it won't ruin it. It wasn't my fault. I got laid off along with many others. Of course I'll get another job."

Joe's task is to change his point of view so that he can go on with a productive and positive job search.

Sally disputed her conclusion that she wasn't a good wife.

"Wait a minute, who says this was my fault? I was a very good wife. I put up with a lot from him. He just found someone else."

Sally's task isn't to find herself without a role in the breakup of the marriage, but to find evidence that balances the severe judgment she made, that somehow she was not a good wife.

Unanswerable Questions

Another way the normal operation of your mind can get clogged is through unanswerable questions. If the question is important to you and is really unanswerable, your mind can get stuck and accidentally cause great pain. For example, when Sally's husband left her for another woman, she kept asking herself unanswerable questions, like “

"What did I do wrong?"

"Am I so unlovable?"

"Who would hire me?"

A productive question will produce a good answer; something gets answered or accomplished, and you move toward your goals. However, bad questions are the source of much of our emotional pain. Bad questions are those that jam your thinking process, because they're unanswerable. Now, how does that happen?

Looking for an Answer

You know the power of curiosity. Try to think of a situation where you've been asked a question, and you couldn't think of the answer right away, like, “Who starred in that movie?”

If you make the answer important, it can bug you until you remember. Well, that's the exact same process that a “why” question evokes. “Why” questions are often unanswerable. Or worse yet, they have a thousand *equally possible* answers.

In attempting to answer a “why” question, your question handling process gets clogged. For example,

"Why did they lay me off and keep Murphy?"

"Why did she leave me?"

"Why doesn't she love me?"

"Why did he die?"

If the question implies something bad about *you*, you'll search and search through all of your human weaknesses, each time hurting more and more.

Since you can always come up with different possibilities — all of which hurt — the looping continues. The mind doesn't like to stop until the question is answered. And: the question is *unanswerable*.

“Why Me?” — the World's Worst Question

The world's worst question is, “Why me?” There's no answer. It is unanswerable.

“Why” questions cause you to loop to find the un-findable. The same curiosity that bugged you about the movie star will make you even buggier when you're going through a trauma or crisis. You give it lots of importance, and you try to find an answer.

If you consider the answer to the question,

“Why doesn't he love me?” Or,

“Why doesn't she love me?”

You loop and loop, each time looking for some defect in you that explains why someone doesn't love you. And: *there is no answer*. (Or, there are a thousand answers, none of which may be right.)

Ask Productive Questions

When you're facing some adversity, you need to protect yourself from unnecessary pain. Your personal difficulty is painful enough. You can't let your mental processes hurt you more. So, don't allow any questions that are unanswerable, like,

“Could I have saved him?”

“What could I have done?”

Keep it very simple. Only allow questions that you know the answers to, or questions whose answers you can find easily.

Tell yourself:

“I'm not going to waste time on questions that are unanswerable.” Or

“I have no way to know that, and it would hurt me to try to answer it.”

Use good questions are like,

“What can I do right now to get on with my life?” or

“What can I do to stop looping on this thought?”

Keep those kinds of questions.

Words to Avoid

As you examine your thoughts, be aware of words like “always” or “never.” Look for exaggerations of time in the future, like “forever.” Look for words that suggest distortions in scope like, “nobody” or “everybody.” And look for imperatives like

“must,” “have to,” or “can’t.” Your goal is to make sure that any remaining hurtful thoughts on your list are accurate.

Constructed Images

What about clogging the mind with constructed images that have never happened? Sometimes our mind makes us feel pain by using imagination to create pictures of events that aren’t happening, haven’t happened, and won’t happen.

Fred made himself miserable by imagining that his wife was unfaithful to him. It wasn’t so, but his mind constructed images so real that he thought it must be so. When Fred began asking the four questions, he concluded that he was creating feelings of jealousy by imagining scenes that weren’t happening. He decided he didn’t want his life filled with jealousy, so he ASKed his imagination to construct images of his wife thinking about him and smiling lovingly. He found that worked for him. He was still overly using his imagination, but it was now giving him pictures that brought good feelings.

If you find yourself haunted by an overly-active imagination, you can either keep switching to sensory inputs, to stay in the here and now, or you can recall memories of good times you’ve had in the past. In any case, if the painful images reappear, you can always repeat the four questions and four choices to make them disappear.

The Four Questions

While you’re using your mind productively for dealing with problems you face, your thoughts can’t swirl and hurt. So, we suggest that every time you feel the pain of a bad feeling — as quickly as you realize it — you ask each of the four questions and make one of the four choices.

1. The First Question: What’s Happening?

When you ask yourself “What’s happening?” very quickly you’ll realize,

“I’m having a bad feeling.”

2. The Second Question: How am I creating this feeling?

The second question: “How am I creating this feeling?” asks your thinking processes to check and see what’s going on. For example, you might find:

“I’m trying to answer an unanswerable question.” Or,

“I’m looping on a hurtful memory.” Or,

“I’m looping on a frightening image.” Or,

“I had this thought, and I made a negative assessment, so I got a bad feeling.”

Do you see what you’re going to do here? You’re replacing a hurtful mental process that brings you pain, with a productive question that asks you to examine what’s going on in your mind that’s bringing you bad feelings.

Sometimes you may not have a good answer to the second question, “How am I creating this feeling?” It doesn’t matter, because the question itself creates curiosity rather than pain. If you’re curious you’ll find the answer to the question, and by the time you’ve gone through this cycle two or three times, you’ll have a much better idea of how to answer the question “How am I creating this feeling?”

3. The Third Question: Is this feeling what I want for my life?

Some bad feelings like grief from a loss of a loved one are authentic feelings. As painful as they are, they’re feelings that we all need to get through, in the normal stages of grief. But we don’t need to make the loss greater by asking hurtful questions, or distorting our thoughts or assessments. Also some bad feelings are valid and useful because they lead us to take action that will be productive. In Sally’s case she might find the feeling of anxiety over money to be productive. It might stimulate her to consider how to create a careful budget. But she wouldn’t find it productive to become paralyzed over the feeling and do nothing.

You’ll examine this bad feeling to see if it’s useful and productive and will lead you to take action to get on with your life. Or whether this bad feeling is simply unproductive, hurtful, damaging, and possibly even debilitating.

4. The Fourth Question: How can I move toward what I want in my life?

With this question, you’re examining what you want for your life — in the future — and you’re choosing a productive step you can take toward getting on with that life.

a. First Choice: ACT

The first choice for the question,

“How can I move toward what I want in my life?” is

ACT. When ACTions will move you toward what you want in your life then, choose ACTION. For example, Sally might choose to plan a budget to deal with her concerns about money. Joe might put together the plan for finding a new job.

Instead of asking the unanswerable questions that can clog your mind, you may replace them with four productive questions. By the very act of asking yourself those four questions, you’ve stopped asking the hurtful “why?” question, and are instead asking productive questions. So, once having decided to move toward what you want for your life, you have four choices. Of the four choices you have already selected to ACT, by the simple ACTION you’ve taken to replace the “why?” kind of questions with more productive questions.

b. Second Choice: ASK

If ASKing will move you toward what you want in your life, then ASK. Sally might choose to ask her in-laws to maintain their relationships with her and the children.

Whatever the result, she's dealing with each issue that troubles her and doing her best to cope with it. Joe might locate a job search firm and ask for help in finding a job.

c. Third Choice: ACCEPT

If ACTION or ASKING aren't good options, then the wise choice is to ACCEPT that "what is," is. Sally's husband is gone. She can scream, shout, cry, or anything else she has to do to deal with her grief, but the final stage in coping with loss is acceptance. She can hope it will be different, but she can't let her hope keep her from accepting that "what is," is. Railing against what is can only bring more pain.

Sally was bitter long after her divorce, feeling angry and hurt by her ex-husband. When she asked herself the four questions, she realized that a life of bitterness was not what she wanted. She couldn't think of any action to take, or anything to ask. So, she decided to simply ACCEPT that the marriage was over.

If she has to move, she'll move. If acting and asking are not answers for her, she'll be wise to accept it, and get on with her life.

d. Fourth Choice: FORGIVE

Even after accepting that "what is," is, Sally will need to take the final wise choice and forgive her husband. Not for him. He may well not deserve it. But for Sally's sake, to get on with her life, her innate wisdom will tell her that it is wise to forgive.

"Failure to forgive is the severest form of self-punishment."

Keeping her anger alive, and stoking it or nursing it will only hurt Sally. So, the final step in the set of wise choices is to forgive anyone who has hurt you, and forgive yourself for anything you've done to another that brings you feelings of shame or embarrassment.

Sally realized she had to FORGIVE her husband for what he had done to her, before she could be free of the pain and bitterness. It wasn't easy for Sally to forgive the man who she thought had ruined her life, but when she read the forgiveness quotes she found one that worked for her. (See quotes below.) There are a number of thoughts that can help you forgive, if you decide to forgive. The one that helped Sally let go of her bitterness and forgive her ex, was this one:

"Failure to forgive is the severest form of self-punishment"

and she also liked,

"Don't forgive people because they deserve it. They may not. Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself."

From that time on, anytime the old bad feelings reappeared, Sally would quickly go through the four questions, and immediately remind herself of her choice to forgive. It didn't take long before all the old pain stopped resurfacing.

More Forgiveness Quotes

Forgiveness does not change the past, but it enlarges the future.

If I forgive, I am free to create my experience of my life with more loving thoughts, and fewer pained and angry thoughts.

Forgiveness is a modest price to pay to achieve peace of mind.

If I can forgive others, I can forgive myself.

Don't forgive someone because they deserve it; they may not. Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself.

Forgiveness does not change the past, but it enlarges the future.

Any man can seek revenge. It takes a king or prince to grant a pardon.

Forgiveness is a gift of great value, yet it costs nothing.

When a deep injury is done to us we will never recover until we forgive.

A good marriage is the union of two forgivers.

Forgiveness is a choice. Not a decision. It's an act of will.

Don't wait to forgive until you feel like it. You may never feel like it. Feelings may take time to heal after the choice of forgiveness is made.

The Four Choices

In the exercises, you'll ask the four questions, and then select the wisest choice. We don't expect you to be able to do each of the wise choices yet. You may find that you're not ready to take the ACTION that you need to take. Or, you may find that you're not yet up to ASKING for what you need or want. And, it's unlikely that you'll be able to leap immediately to ACCEPTING those things in a situation that you can't yet accept. And, if you're dealing with a fresh hurt, FORGIVENESS is very, very difficult. Each time you go through this process, you'll find that everything gets easier, and wise coping becomes more possible. And, even if this is your final time through, it's normal that you still might not yet be able to accept or forgive those things that you can't change.

If you're using this process for practice, please read the steps below, which will be used to resolve troublesome situations.

Following the steps for the process is an example of a person who had an automobile accident. The blank form for your use follows that.

The Process for Using "Four Questions Four Choices"

Print out the form that's at the end of this paper. Print two if you think you may have a lot of thoughts.

The situation: At the top of the form describe the situation.

Thoughts: Write down any thought that comes into your mind, thoughts that pertain to the troublesome situation.

Assessments and Feelings: Go back and read over each thought one at a time, and write whatever comes to your mind as a response to that thought (your assessment). At that same time, write down whatever feeling the assessment produced.

Cross off unanswerable questions: Go back over your list of thoughts. If any thought is an unanswerable question, tell yourself not to clog up your mind with a hurtful and time-wasting question and cross it off.

Add new thoughts: Relax for a moment and see if there are any new thoughts to add. If so, repeat the steps 2-4 again.

Re-evaluate your assessments: Read each thought and check for accuracy. If your assessment of the thought was reasonable, leave it as is. If the thought and assessment produces fear and anxiety, it's probably distorted and should be crossed off.

Ask the four questions: With each remaining thought, ask the four wise questions and select one of the four wise choices:

Questions:

What's happening?

How am I creating this feeling?

Is this what I want for the rest of my life?

How can I move toward what I want?

Choices:

Act

Ask

Accept

Forgive

Review the remaining thoughts: Look for the words to avoid (always, never, any, forever, nobody, everybody, must, have to, can't). Collect evidence to prove or disprove the thought. Cross off inaccurate thoughts, or rewrite them.

Choose a process for any remaining thoughts (Act, Ask, Accept, Forgive), and create a plan.

Start the process again, if you feel some issues are still unresolved.

Example: An automobile accident

Thought	Assessment	Feeling	Choice
I can't believe I didn't see that car.	I was careless	guilty	
Charles will be furious.	It was my first accident.	defensive	
The baby could have been hurt.	It would have been my fault	guilty	
Why did this have to happen, now?	We have so much going on.	harrid	
What if our insurance goes way up?	We'll have to give up our vacation	sad	
What if we get sued?	We'll lose everything	fear	
Maybe I should stop driving.	That would ruin my life.	panicky	
I'm so glad the baby wasn't hurt.	I always use the baby seat.	proud	
I'm glad no one was hurt.	It could have been worse.	grateful	
I hope Charles understands.	He can get really angry.	worried	
He's not the world's best driver.	He takes more risks than I.	defensive	
His mother will think I was careless.	She'll be right.	defensive	
I'd better call her and tell her.	Let Charles tell her.	insecure	
I should have avoided the accident.	I must not have paid attention.	guilty	
Is the car ruined?	It doesn't look that bad.	worried	

Description of the troublesome situation: _____

Thought	Assessment	Feeling	Choice

Description of the troublesome situation: _____

Thought	Assessment	Feeling	Choice