

THE ANATOMY OF A GOOD THINK LIST

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If you are engaging in discipleship and counseling that is truly biblical in its goals and practice, then you are addressing the need for and the process of change in the life of the counselee. The need for change is identified in the reproof of God's Word when the counselee's thoughts and/or actions are revealed to be "out of step" with Scripture. The process of true, God-honoring change is possible only for believers and is progressive in nature as long as we are living on this sin-cursed earth. This process results in the believer gradually becoming freer from sin and more like Jesus Christ.

The activity of this process involves the work of God and the work of man. God washes us by the water of the Word (Eph. 5:26) and matures us as we hear, study, and apply His Word (2 Co. 3:18). Faithful believers are called to whole-heartedly participate in God's work by mortifying "the deeds of the body" (Ro. 8:13), godly self-discipline (1 Ti. 4:7), living in a way that reflects our wonderful salvation (Eph. 4:1,17), fleeing sinful practices (1 Ti. 6:11), pursuing righteousness (2 Ti. 2:22), controlling our thinking (Phil. 4:8), and so forth.

Paul summarized this process as "renewing of the mind".

Ro. 12:2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Col. 3:8–10ff But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him—

Eph. 4:22–24 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

I emphasize mind renewal here because the "new self" referenced in Col. 3:10 and Eph. 4:24 has already been "put on" (once and for all) when the believer was justified. This new self is thus continually being renewed.

So at the risk of over-simplifying: when we counsel, one of our responsibilities is to come alongside others to help them in their part of the process of mind renewal. The mind is a critical part of whole-heart obedience (to which I would add the will and affections). John Owens referred to the mind as the "watchman of the soul", because if "the mind fails to identify a sin as evil, wicked, vile, and bitter, the affections will not be safe from

clinging to it, nor the will from giving consent.”¹ Furthermore, if we are going to help others change in a specific way, we must first discern specifically what counselees need to change; as counselors, we do this through thorough data gathering and searching of the Scriptures.

I really can’t think of a time in my counseling experience when the instruction of how to change did not involve the counselee learning to think and reason or evaluate in a more biblical way. But therein lies the great challenge for me (and possibly for you) – we can often arrive at “Here is how you need to think about that ...” but this rarely (if ever) results in an instantaneous and final departure from the old way of thinking. The fact is that your counselee does *not* think that way now, and this new way of thinking will not come naturally because it opposes a preconditioned habit fueled by their idolatry.

Even if you succeed in convincing your counselee on Monday evening at 7 pm that this new way of thinking is best, will they still choose this new evaluation Friday at 2:15 pm when their idolatry is once again challenged? I hope so. You hope so. We pray for it (don’t we?). But how do we help them *deliberately train* for growth so as to replace a long-practiced, habitual, sinful way of thinking with a brand new, biblical thought process?

Think Lists: What Are They?

I was first introduced to the concept of “Think Lists” while reading Jay Adams back in my earlier days of counselor training. Dr. Adams proposed using this tool (usually in association with Phil. 4:8) as a means to counteract sinful or unprofitable thinking; he described it as “a list of things to think about whenever you find your mind wandering towards areas into which it should not trespass.”² For me, Wayne Mack helped expand the concept through a detailed worksheet intended to guide counselees in how to apply Phil. 4:8 principles.³ Perhaps one of my favorite resources is an appendix in a book by John Vandegriff because it includes practical “projects” associated with each type of godly thinking listed in Phil. 4:8 as it applies to fearful, hurtful, and lustful thinking and to self-pity.⁴

When I first began assigning Think Lists to counselees, I was frankly not very skilled at populating them and neither were my counselees. I also lacked a clear plan as to how to use them effectively. Over time, I began to find this tool to be a helpful and valuable means of training in righteousness for my counselees, myself, my wife, and my children.

¹ Lundgaard, Kris, *The Enemy Within: Straight Talk About the Power and Defeat of Sin*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1998.

² Adams, Jay E., *From Forgiven to Forgiving*. Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Publishing, 1994, p. 87.

³ Mack, Wayne A., *A Homework Manual for Biblical Living: Vol. 1 Personal and Interpersonal Problems*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1979, pp. 176-182.

⁴ Vandegriff, John, *In the Arena of the Mind*. Howell, NJ: Ask, Seek, and Knock Publishing, 1992.

Key Elements of Think Lists

Allow me to suggest six, rudimentary qualities of a good think list:

I. Follows a “Spiral development” process

In my job, I often work on projects that include developing software products for a customer. Much of the time, we follow what the industry refers to as a “spiral process”. This process begins by determining the requirements of what the customer needs the software to do followed by the design, development, and testing of the software product. At that point, the customer can evaluate the first version of the software and provide feedback on what needs to change (i.e., new or modified requirements). We then go back through the same cycle of design, development, and testing, and we repeat it until the product sufficiently meets the customer’s need (or we run out of time and/or money). The idea (at least in theory) is that at the end of each iteration, the software product is more mature and useful.

So it is with the development of think lists; you should expect that they will evolve over time. You and your counselee should update and refine his think list as the counselee grows and as you are better able to discern the problem.

For example, after a first session with “Eric” (a professing believer), you discern that he has an unbiblical view of God’s purposes in trials. But since you lack context as to specific ways Eric responds to trials, your think list items are very general.

1. There is no trial or trouble that God will not use to His glory and to make me more like Christ.
(Ro. 8:28-29)
2. At all times, God is ...
Perfect in His love
Infinite in His wisdom
Complete in His sovereignty⁵
3. Am I regularly expressing gratitude to God for His holy purpose in all of my trials? (Jas. 1:2-4; 1 Thes. 5:16-18)

However, upon returning the following week, Eric presents you with details about two “events” that occurred since your last meeting. In both of those events, Eric had something break on an old pickup truck on which he depended for his job income, alluding (at least in Eric’s mind) to the eventual demise of the vehicle. His response reveals a sinful preoccupation with finances that is specifically focused on the next significant expense he faces, the purchase of another pickup truck. Furthermore, his preoccupation with his truck was affecting his work ethic. Now, with more data in hand, you are able to discern more specifically how Eric needs to change. What you assigned last week is still very relevant, but now you add to the list:

⁵ Bridges, Jerry, *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*. Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1988, p. 18.

4. This is God's truck. If it breaks down, then He will give me the grace to deal with it at that time. Right now, I should be concerned with being God's kind of employee, working heartily as unto the Lord (Col. 3:23).
5. Am I being content with the basics? (Phil. 4:11-13)

Perhaps as you continue, you learn of specific ways Eric needs to change as a husband, so you add items relevant to his duties as a husband to the list. Over time, Eric may develop a new, godly habit of responding to financial concerns, so you can remove items to make way for new areas of focus.

It's a spiral development.

II. Is simple and focused

As tempted as we can sometimes be to load a counselee down with dozens of Scripture passages and biblical truths, such quantity is not often a helpful approach. The contents of a think list should address what you are emphasizing in counseling, and the number of areas of emphasis should be few, not many. Additionally, the best entries are precise and concise such that they are conducive to memorization and recall.

III. Identifies sin as "sin"

This is a requisite feature of biblical counseling and representative of sober, God-honoring thinking (1 Co. 2:13), so it should be reflected in how we populate think lists. This can be especially helpful in reminding the counselee of how preconditioned, sinful habits are typically manifested in their lives. Continuing with Eric's list, we could add:

6. Worrying about temporal things like my truck is sin from which I must repent. (Mt. 6:25)

Helping Eric's mind identify sin, especially when it first rears its head, promotes a pattern of repentance and emphasizes the biblical process for spiritual growth.

IV. Teaches/reinforces counseling instruction

From the counselee's perspective, listening to even 15-20 minutes of instruction can be overwhelming, like drinking through the proverbial fire hose. I find it helpful to ask myself before the end of a session, "What would I want drilled into his head between now and the next session?" If I can articulate the answer to that question in a concise and precise manner, then I have elements to include on a think list that will allow the pertinent components of my counseling instruction to soak in until the next time we meet.

V. Reminds the counselee of biblical truths relevant to their problems

Often I find that if I do a good job during the time of instruction, a brief sentence or phrase is all that is needed to bring to mind the fuller content. For example, in addressing conflict between my two sons that led to some bitterness, jealousy, and anger, we studied Cain and Able in Genesis 4. One of the things I wanted to impress

upon my boys was that if left unaddressed by God's grace and their repentance, that sinful root would only worsen – perhaps not to murder, but certainly to the demise of a brotherly relationship and their relationship with the Lord. While discussing the passage, I took note that the imagery in verse 7 resonated well with the boys. So after we prayed, here is how I summarized the lesson from Genesis 4 for their think lists:

Sin is crouching at the door and its desire is for me, but I must master it.

Another point to make here is that often in counseling we are helping them to learn to understand what obedience “looks like”. That involves not only doing the right things, but doing them for the right reasons. Think lists can help your counselee remember to check their motives as they learn new behaviors. For example:

In times of temptation, I will meditate on Gospel truths to motivate me to make wise choices.

(Heb. 12:1-3)

Being a godly husband means I must place great value and effort into my wife's sanctification.

(Eph. 5:25-27)

As you go over something that happened recently to the counselee where they responded sinfully, you can help populate a think list by asking the question, “The next time a situation like this happens to you, what do you need to remember to help you choose obedience?”

Nothing is worth sinning against God. Obeying God is more important than having my own way.

(Ps. 119:104,128)

(To review before going inside my house after a full day at work): My home is my primary mission field – nothing I have done today is more important than being faithful to the ministry opportunities and privileges that God has prepared for me tonight.

VI. Motivates godly behavior/responses

This point has been illustrated in the previous examples, but it bears reminding that disciplined, biblical thinking strongly references and appeals to God's Word with the goal of having it flow out of us through our words, actions, responses, etc. Good think lists will therefore emphasize the connection between God's truths and the counselee's thoughts and actions. In particular, the contents of a think list should focus on specific applications and implementations of Scripture that need to become habitual in the counselee's life.

How to Use Think Lists

In reference to using think lists, Jay Adams wrote that “Overcoming your problem takes prior planning,”⁶ and that involves planning to not sin as well as planning to obey. The intention behind employing think lists is to have a tool that will help prepare your counselee to think biblically *prior* to times of temptation. This helps the counselee to *practice* how they think and reason until it becomes more habitual, and it will only become a new habit when the mind is informed and activated by Scripture. Commenting on Ro. 12:1-2, John MacArthur writes, “The renewed mind is one saturated with and controlled by the Word of God.”⁷

It is entirely possible that the concept of developing new thinking habits is foreign to your counselee, but it helps if they recognize that their unbiblical thinking is also a habit that has been practiced for a long time. They developed those habits to assist in pursuing idolatrous desires – now they will need to develop biblical habits to assist in pursuing godly desires.

This, of course, takes a sustained, deliberate effort. So when I assign a think list to a counselee, here is the general guidance I provide them about using the list:

Keep it with you so you can review it frequently.

Carry it around in a way that is convenient to you and hopefully not prone to be forgotten. For some, that’s a folded piece of paper or 3x5 index card in a shirt pocket; for others, it’s a PDF file on a smart phone. Either way, if you don’t have it on you when you have the opportunity or need to review it, it doesn’t do you much good; take it with you everywhere you go.

Review it carefully.

This is not a document intended for 15-second scans (at least not at first). If it is truly populated with biblical truths that address serious issues in your life, then you need to allow it to soak in, like a tea bag in hot water. When you read through it, meditate on small chunks at a time. Imagine yourself in a typical scenario where you may be tempted to sin like before, but this time your imagined self remembers what is on your think list and then responds in such a way as to exalt your Savior.

Pray through each item, repenting of your sinful habits that have instigated the need for this list. Ask God to help you make this way of thinking part of you and thank Him for the guidance His Word has provided.

If there are Scripture passages associated with items on the list, memorize them so as to hide the Word of God in your heart. In fact, if you review the list frequently enough and long enough, you should basically have it memorized as well. To take things one step further, practice articulating parts of your list to others. Thinking through a truth is a good practice, but being able to explain it to someone requires

⁶ Adams, p. 87.

⁷ MacArthur, John Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed., Ro 12:2 (Nashville: Word Pub., 1997).

an even more thorough command of the subject. After all, when you are in a moment of temptation, you will need to essentially speak it to yourself even under distracting circumstances.

Review and pray through the think list at optimum times.

Having the right things on your think list is only part of the battle. Until the items become more “automatic” for you, you must be strategic about choosing *when* you review the list. In general, review the list when you are at your “best” physically and most focused mentally. Right before you collapse into bed and fall asleep is not one of those times. Neither is the time of day at work when your job activities are the most hectic and demanding.

Counselors should work with their counsees to identify the best times and find ways to schedule reminders and/or record evidence that the counselee has been diligent. I have found it to be particularly helpful to have them review the list during breaks at work, during meals, in the car before going into work, in the car before going back into the house after work, in waiting rooms before appointments, etc.

If you have identified common times or locations of temptation, then by all means review the list before those times. For example, I have directed husbands to sit in their driveway and not go inside their homes after work until they have prayed through their list. Wives at home may benefit from a review right before the time of day where they are most tempted to just lay down on the couch, right before their husbands come home from work, or right before the children come home from school. Singles dealing with struggles in the evenings when they are alone should review their lists at the start of those alone times.

In the spirit of flexibility, whenever you see trouble looming (e.g., internal frustration begins to build), step aside if you can and look over your list at that time. For example, a young person who begins to display sinful anger at home with a sibling can recover well and build upon new habits by stepping into their bedroom to pray through their list at that time.

Review the list after a failure to obey.

These can actually be some of the most profitable times to review a think list because it helps promote repentance. In your review of the circumstance that occurred, how does what you were thinking and wanting line up against your think list? How might you have responded differently if you had remembered what is on your list? Is there something that needs to be added to or revised on your list (i.e., as part of the “spiral development” process)?

If the counselee is diligent in following these basic guidelines, by God’s sufficient grace and the work of the Holy Spirit, the contents of the list will eventually soak in and result in new habits of thinking and reasoning.

Think Lists and Children

I briefly mentioned earlier that my wife and I use think lists with our children; that was the case even when our children were too young to read or write. All of the points I have made about how to use think lists applies to training children in principle, but we did a few things a little differently to compensate for their youth. For instance, I don't expect a six-year old to carry around his think list so that during recess he decides it is a good time to retreat to the monkey bars and meditate on God's Word.

Even if the child cannot read or write well, parents can teach the list to little ones much like they would a catechism. If the child can write, a good method for memorization is to have them rewrite the list one or more times each day for a week or two. For example, here is how we instructed our young children for the first two weeks of a new think list:

- Write out the numbered statements once per day
- Begin memorization of each Scripture passage
- Pray with Mom and Dad each night for God to help him with each item

Once they knew the list well enough, our usage changed to:

- Continue memorization
- When Mom, Dad, or [the child] sense that he is struggling with sinful anger, he is to rewrite the list and pray through it
- When he has a good command of the list, he can be asked to simply review and pray through the list during times of temptation

It is important to note that the list is never to be used as a punishment device. This is a tool that is constructive – something that helps them understand what obedience looks like and to learn that obedience is lovely and best for them. I will never forget the words of my youngest son when under conviction for a pattern of sinful anger in his life (I think he was about 6 years old): “I *know* I'm angry. I just don't know how *not* to be angry.”

“I know, son,” we replied, “and we are going to show you how and help you learn.”

That earned a memorable hug from a child who still needed to realize his desperate need of a Savior. This brings me to my final point about using think lists with children: don't neglect the gospel for the unbelievers in your home. The point is that they cannot please God by doing the things on the list any more than they can save themselves. To drive that home, we often ended our lists with the item:

I need Jesus to save me and change my heart so that I can be a wise boy.

Jn. 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”

I'd like to share one final encouragement to parents about the usefulness of think lists with children. The very first time we developed a think list for a child was for our oldest son, Gabe, who was dealing with a pattern of sinful anger motivated by a love of control. We stuck with the list for several weeks and saw a good change in his actions and, more

importantly, a softening in his heart about his own sinfulness. Two years later, we were packing up our home to move, and Carmen, my wife, found the crumpled list in his desk drawer. Feeling a bit nostalgic, she showed it to Gabe in a “remember this” sense. Well, it turns out that the list was crumpled because Gabe had been using it the whole time. Every time he sensed sinful anger in his heart and was convicted by it, he would retreat to his room to look over the list. Why? Because he found comfort and hope in the biblical instruction it contained. Even if Gabe eventually forgets the contents of that list, I pray he will remember that God’s Word is packed full of hope and help for anything he will ever face.

Conclusions and Resources

I hope you consider using this helpful tool with your counselees who need a little more structure in building new habits of thinking and reasoning. Whether you realize it or not, there are many examples of good think list items all around you if you read and study good, biblical materials related to counseling and discipleship. On our church website, for example, is my compilation of helpful and practical comments from several books focused on helping husbands and wives – most all of which can be included on a think list.⁸

Here are few of my other favorite sources:

- Chapter 2 of *Heart of Anger* (Lou Priolo):
“25 Ways That Parents Provoke Their Children to Anger”
- *From Pride to Humility* (Stuart Scott):
Lists for manifestations of pride and manifestations of humility
- *Practicing Proverbs* (Richard Mayhue):
Excellent organization of the Proverbs into practical categories
- *In the Arena of the Mind* (John Vandegriff):
Tables applying Phil 4:8 to fearful thinking, hurtful thinking, self-pity, & lust
- Various booklets by Jay Adams, Lou Priolo, Mark Shaw, CCEF, etc.

⁸ See “Husband’s Guide to Companionship” and “Wife’s Guide to Companionship” on www.gcchsv.org