



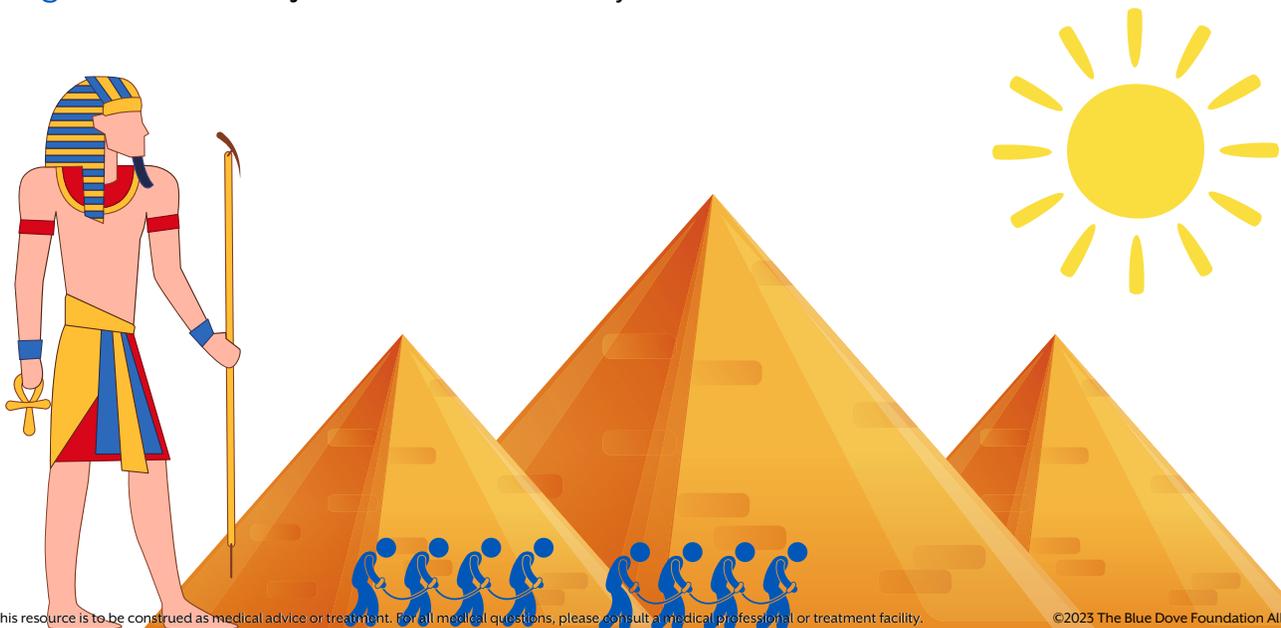
RESIST YOUR INNER PHARAOH: UNHARDEN YOUR HEART

And God said unto Moses: 'When thou goest back into Egypt, see that thou do before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in thy hand; but I will harden his heart, and he will not let the people go. (Exodus 4:21)



Over the course of the Exodus, one of the driving forces in the story is the “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart. This “hardening” set him in his cruel ways and prevented him from releasing the Jews from slavery, despite the increasing severity of the plagues and the pleas of his constituents. As most commonly understood, the loss of his free will to repent was a divine punishment for his mistreatment of the Jewish people in slavery, but there are voices within Jewish tradition that actually see Pharaoh’s challenge as something that plagues almost everyone — habituation.

Describing the nature of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, Bible scholar, Nachum Sarna, wrote “This [‘God hardened Pharaoh’s heart’] is the biblical way of asserting that the king’s intransigence has by then become habitual and irreversible; his character has become his destiny. He is deprived of the possibility of relenting and is irresistibly impelled to his self-wrought doom.” (The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus)





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Sarna's naturalistic reading of Pharaoh's behavior makes this story an extreme version of an otherwise human experience. Everyone has habits and patterns of behavior that can be neutral or even helpful in a given circumstance. But they can also be extremely harmful to our well-being and/or the well-being of our families, partners and friends. Being mindful and thoughtful means being aware of the range of emotions that drive our decisions and doing our best to make decisions conscientiously and from force of habit, especially when it comes to our natural attitudes under pressure. Like Pharaoh, moments of rage can make it especially hard to see outside of ourselves and change. Prolonged experiences of anger and the stress hormones that anger causes your body to release "can destroy neurons in areas of the brain associated with judgment and short-term memory and weaken the immune system." ([Psychology Today: Anger](#)). Prolonged anger and holding grudges can also make you lose sight of yourself. "Many people hold deep grudges, even if they don't want to. This may occur because grudges come with an identity. With a grudge intact, people know they were wronged. There exists a kind of rightness and strength in this identity." ([Psychology Today: Anger](#)) For this reason 12th century rabbinic scholar Maimonides wrote that anger is a form of idolatry.



The early sages said, "Whoever gets angry, it is as if they worshipped idolatry." They further said about one who angers, if they are a scholar their wisdom will depart from them, and if they are a prophet their prophetic spirit will depart from them. [The sages further stated,] "People who have tempers – their lives are not lives." (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Knowledge 2:3)

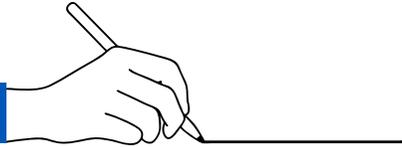
While there are situations where anger is certainly a justifiable feeling, anger left to unchecked for a long time can be detrimental to our mental and physical wellness, but there are techniques and processes we can use every day to habituate ourselves toward a calm demeanor. Cognitive restructuring, for example, utilizes different methods, such as thought recording, decatastrophizing and guided questioning, to reduce anger and anxiety by replacing these cognitive distortions with more positive ways of thinking and speaking to ourselves.



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There are generally four steps to cognitive restructuring that involve writing the situation down and interpreting your own experience.

1. Write down a situation that is upsetting you.



This could be an ongoing confrontation you are having with a friend or partner, or even yourself. Simply describe the situation and any thoughts that come to mind when you think about the situation. Maybe you are having an ongoing disagreement with a coworker who doesn't like your ideas.

2. Select one negative thought.



Of the negative thoughts you wrote down, select the one that is causing the most frustration or anger. That will be the thought you choose to work on. Make sure to format it as a statement and not a question. Instead of writing "What if he thinks I'm stupid," write "He thinks I'm stupid."

3. Look for different points of view.



Review your situation and your selected thought from different angles to help you see a bigger picture and think about it differently. Consider answering the following questions about your thought and situation: (1) What is the effect of believing this thought? What would happen if I didn't believe this thought? (2) What is the evidence supporting this thought? What is the evidence against this thought? (3) Is there an alternative explanation? (4) What's the worst that could happen? Would I survive it? What's the best that could happen? What's most likely? (5) If someone I cared about were in this situation, what would I tell them? (6) What can I do about it?





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4. Craft an alternative response.



Having pondered your situation more carefully by stepping outside of yourself and the identity your anger and grudge had built for you, perhaps you already have found a sense of peace. But should that anger return, it can be useful to incorporate your answers to the questions in the previous step into an alternative response or statement to the initial negative thought. Instead of saying “He thinks I’m stupid,” consider saying “He doesn’t understand my point of view.” ([Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: Los Angeles](#)).

Nachmonidies, a 14th century rabbinic scholar, actually offered his own son advice that nicely compliments cognitive restructuring. In the letter of the Ramban, he suggested that proper worship of God and our behavior with others start with controlling the ways we speak with one another. Like cognitive restructuring, maintaining a calm and conscientious demeanor will habituate you to peace rather than anger, even under stress.

Accustom yourself to always speak all of your words calmly, to every man and at every time. In doing so you will prevent your anger from flaring...Act with restraint in front of everyone. When someone calls you, don't answer loudly, but calmly...Take heed to study Torah constantly, so you will be able to fulfill its commands. When you arise from your learning, reflect carefully on what you have studied, to find a lesson in it that you can put into practice. Examine your actions every morning and evening, and in this way every one of your days will be spent in repentance. (Iggeret HaRamban)

Cognitive restructuring is a useful tool for un-hardening our hearts and managing stressful situations, but you can best use it if you make it habitual with a journal or worksheet dedicated to this practice or [our worksheet](#). By making it a practice, not only will you have dozens of alternative responses to populate otherwise negative thoughts; you will make this reframing technique a habit worth “hardening.”



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Activity - Keeping a Thought Record

The following worksheet inspired by [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: Los Angeles](#) offers a step-by-step guide to crafting a thought record and helps you adjust your thinking to reframe situations. You can repeat this process for any distressing thought.

1. Describe the situation you're struggling with.
2. List every emotion the situation is making you feel and rate their intensity on a scale of 1-10.
3. Write down the thoughts/images that come to mind when reviewing the situation and rate how much you believe them on a scale of 1-10.
4. Select one automatic thought that is causing you the most distress. That thought will be the emotions you'll focus on on the following page.
5. Finally, using your answers from the following page, develop a short alternative response to the automatic thought you're analyzing. Once you're done, cut the response out and put it somewhere you can regularly access it if you ever need to.

SITUATION(S)

EMOTION(S)

AUTOMATIC THOUGHT(S)



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1. What is the effect of believing this thought?

2. What would happen if I didn't believe this thought?

3. What is the evidence supporting this thought?

4. What is the evidence against this thought?

5. Is there an alternative explanation?

6. What's the worst that could happen, and would I survive it?

7. What's the best that could happen?

8. What is the most likely scenario?

9. If my friend, _____ were in this situation, what would I tell them?

10. What can I do about this?



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Now use your answers to the questions on the previous page to create an alternative response for that situation.

MOST LIKELY...



THE ONLY THING I CAN DO...







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Now use your answers to the questions on the previous page to create an alternative response for that situation.





