



WEIGHT LOSS FOR BUSY PHYSICIANS

— with Katrina Ubell, MD —

Katrina Ubell: Well, hello there, my friend. Welcome to the podcast. I'm so glad you're here today. I'm really, really excited about this new series, Back to Basics, that I'm going to start off with today. I cannot wait to share this with you. I think it's going to be so great. So, it's been 244 episodes. We've been doing this podcast for a long time. And some of you have been with me this whole time, and we are really good long time friends. And some of you that's not the case, and you might be really new to this information. And what I do know is that when you see a couple hundred episodes, it can be really, really overwhelming. You don't know where to start. You know that to get through everything, it would be lots and lots and dozens and dozens of hours. And you just want help losing weight right now, and I completely get that. I know I would come to this and just be like, okay, but what should I start with? What should I do first? And that's exactly what this Back to Basics series is.

So, periodically, as we go along, I will be going back through some of these basic principles that I've discussed years ago on this podcast and give you the more updated, most recent version of how I teach it. And so, not that the other information is bad or old or anything like that. But if you are new or you're just wanting to refresh your mind and your mindset on what you need to be focusing on to really get started losing weight, all you have to do is just Google. I mean, a lot of people just put in Katrina Ubell podcast, and then you can say Back to Basics, or you can put in Weight Loss for Busy Physicians, Back to Basics, and these will all come up. All these episodes will come up, so you'll be able to see it.

And I will say that whichever platform you listen to this podcast on, sometimes there's searchability, sometimes there's not. I feel like they change the platforms quite frequently in how you utilize them and where you find stuff. So, I don't want to date this by saying, "This is the way to do it in this app or that app." But just know that if you Google it, you will always find those episodes. And you'll know exactly which episodes they are, and you can just start trucking your way through those to get that initial information that you need.

And also, to be quite honest, if you're new to my work, and you're probably just like, "What's her deal? I want to check her out and see if we are in alignment or if this seems like this might work for me," you can just listen to a couple of these Back to Basics episodes and you'll get a good sense early on very quickly of whether we're meant to be or not, you and I.

And if you've been around a long time, listen, the fundamentals are most important. Coach Wooden, I think he taught basketball at Indiana, I want to say, or was it UCLA? No, Hoosier's is different. I think he was UCLA, and he was one of the most winningest coaches of all time. And one of his biggest principles was practicing the fundamentals again and again and again. You cannot hear this stuff too many times.

And every time you hear it, it's going to be a little bit nuanced, fresh. You're going to hear something you didn't hear before, or what you hear will mean something different to you than the way you heard it before. So, anytime you're needing a little pick me up, you're needing to circle back around, gather some momentum, and get yourself going again, this series is going to be great for you. So, very excited to introduce the Back to Basics series, and this is the first episode.

So, today we're going to be talking about the thinking cycle. And really, if you go back historically, really for thousands of years, various people, scholars, philosophers, have been describing what I'm calling the thinking cycle, which is the concept that your thoughts create your feelings or your emotions, and your emotions drive your actions. So, thoughts create feelings, feelings drive actions. Where you might've heard the term thinking cycle before is as a part of cognitive behavioral therapy, which is totally evidence-based and very, very popular.

We know that this works. CBT was created by Dr. Aaron Beck, who is a psychiatrist. And there's all kinds of even iterations off of CBT, different kinds of therapy. And we're not doing therapy here. I am not a therapist. I am a master certified life coach, but I am not a therapist. So, we're not doing actual CBT here, but there's some really good concepts from within the CBT teachings that we can learn from, and that we can apply here.

Now, again, it's not new. It's just that Dr. Beck created this form of therapy and decided to call it the thinking cycle. But there literally, I mean, countless numbers of people who have described this over many, many years and called it various things. I think just calling it the thinking cycle is very simple and easy, so that's what we're going to go with. So, we have this basic core root cycle of thoughts creating feelings, feelings driving actions. We understand that this is how our brains work. So, let's break this apart into the individual components and talk about what each actually is.

So, let's start with thoughts. So, you might be like, yeah, that's just what's going on in my brain. That's what a thought is. But I like to break it down a little bit more. And what I love about the fact that even thousands of years ago, humans were describing this thinking, feeling, action cycle is that they had no neuroscience to back this up. But even in the last 20, 30 years, neuroscience really has been able to show that this is true, that the the Stoics right way back when, and I think that's fun to have the scientific backup to go, yeah, this really is true, instead of just going, yeah, I think so, but what if they're wrong?

So, what is a thought? A thought is what happens when two neurons in your brain, to brain cells, fire together. So, they fire together and you get what's called a thought. There's some meaning that your brain is making. And so, we have, various studies will quote different numbers, but on average about 60,000 thoughts a day. That is a lot. So, our brains are just busy, busy, busy, busy having thought after thought after thought, like split seconds worth of thoughts constantly and ongoing.

Your internal voice, when you're talking to yourself, that's all thoughts. All the things that you think are bad about the world and that you think are good about the world, all of that, those are all thoughts. And of course, I said what you think about it, but we often think that those are facts. We're going to get to facts in just a minute here. So, that's truly all a thought is, two neurons firing together creating meaning about something, okay?

Next we have feelings. Feelings is where I start to lose people sometimes, especially doctors, because we're like, what are you talking about feelings? That's too touchy feely. Now we're getting woo woo. Like no. I don't have time for feelings. I'm too busy for feelings. I'm not a very emotional person. That's what I used to think when I was in practice, I was like, no, I'm very emotionally stable.

What I really love is how much I told myself I really wasn't an anxious person. And it's really interesting now with everything that I know how I can see, like, right. I didn't feel like I was very emotionally labile because I was using food to stabilize my emotions. That was like my mood stabilizing drug, so to speak. And for you, it might also be alcohol. For me, alcohol is never been too big of a thing. I can take it or leave it. But that is another big one that a lot of us use. So, it's like if you're identifying as someone who really doesn't feel like they have a lot of feelings, or you feel like you're not really in touch with that, it really could be because you're neutralizing most of your emotions with food and overeating. More on that to come, okay? So, what is the feeling? When those two neurons that are creating your thought fire together, there is a complex chemical cascade that happens. And this is still to be described, still to be discovered, and also incredibly complex and varied.

And I think for the scope of what we're doing here, it doesn't make any sense to get into all kinds of details of names and descriptors of various hormones and chemical compounds and where they're circling around. I like to just keep it simple. I think we can agree big picture that what's happening is there's a chemical cascade that goes from your brain into your body. And as it's circulating through your body, it creates a certain set of sensations. There's a way that your body feels that's different than the way it felt before you had that thought.

So, I always like to think about what it feels like to be nervous, because that's a feeling that a lot of people are familiar with. And we don't particularly love feeling nervous. Well, if you're not thinking nervous thoughts, you don't feel nervous. Right? Until you have the thought that there's a lot of pressure on this, or I hope I don't screw up, or they're going to think I'm stupid, or I don't think I prepared enough, or whatever it is that your thought is, before that you weren't feeling nervous. As soon as you have that thought, you start to feel nervous, and that's because of that chemical cascade.

And when you think about it, like what's happening in your body when you're feeling nervous? You might be sweating a little bit more. Your eyes might be open a little wider. You might have an elevated heart rate. You get that butterfly feeling in your stomach. So much of that is related to an adrenaline surge. Right? Feeling like there's a little epi squeeze. Your adrenal glands gave a little squeeze and you're like, woo, I'm ready to go. It's like a little bit of a fight or flight response as though there's like a threat and you have to be prepared and ready to go. So, that's a whole physiological response that happens in response to your thought, okay? So, that is how thoughts create our feelings.

So, then we have our feelings. I use feelings and emotions interchangeably. So, you have the way you feel. And depending on how you feel, it's going to determine what your actions are. And I like to think about it this way. On a weekend, when you have no outside plans, like places you need to be, you might have a long to-do list of things that you really want to get done around the house or things like that.

And if you're feeling motivated, right, if your emotion is motivated and/or energized, let's say, you're much more likely to take those actions than if you're feeling unmotivated, or lethargic, or fatigued, or exhausted, or frustrated, or whatever it may be. You're much less likely to take those actions. If you're feeling unmotivated, if you're feeling very fatigued, it's much more likely that you're going to get glued to the couch, get sucked in, start watching some show you didn't even mean to be watching or get sucked into social media or something like that. You're much less likely to take those actions coming from different emotions.

And so, the actions that we take are the obvious things like what we do. But actions are also inaction, like what we don't do. Right? Because emotions can drive us to not do things as well. And at the same time, we often don't think of actions as brain chatter. Right? Because sometimes we're like, no, I'm really feeling unmotivated, but I do my list anyway. Well, that may be the case, like physically you were moving about your day doing all those things on your list. But what is really happening is there's a bunch of chatter in your head talking about you don't really feel like doing this, or you're blaming someone or mad that they're not helping you. Your experience of doing the thing is very different than if you were feeling differently while you were doing the thing. And maybe even the way you do it. It still gets done, but the way you do it is different because of the way that you're feeling. So, it's actions, it's inactions, and it's also reactions, too. Sometimes we don't think of yelling at someone as an action, but it is, or being snippy, or being cold and withdrawing attention from somebody. All those things are actions as well. Okay? So, thoughts, feelings, actions.

So, let's talk a little bit about the difference between facts and thoughts. The way that we talk about our life is we think that most of what we think is just true, and we think that those things are facts. We think that if our experience of someone is negative, like that coworker is very difficult, then we think it's a fact that that person is difficult because that's our experience of it. And that's what people will say, "Well, it feels true to me." But what feels true doesn't mean that it's a fact.

So, the way I like to determine whether something is a fact or not is to ask myself would every single person on the planet agree, including the person we're talking about? So, let's think about that person who's difficult. You might say, "Well, listen, everyone in the department knows that they are totally difficult." Okay, but would that person also say that they're difficult? Would every single person in the world say that? Would they all agree this person's difficult? Probably not. It's our thought that that person is difficult. Right? The person who you think is difficult is probably like, listen, this is all justified, and they have their reasons for why they act that way.

So, it has to be something everybody would agree on. And when you define facts in that way, there's not that many of them, I'm sorry to report to you. But what that means is that mostly what we think are facts are our thoughts. And the reason why this is good news is because we often think that because our thoughts seem factual to us, they seem like the truth, we think they can't be changed.

We think that's just how it is. And that's very disempowering. Because your brain is creating your thoughts, you have control over what you thinking.

So, if you don't like your experience of what's going on, if you don't like the thoughts that you're thinking and the feelings that they're creating, the best news ever that I have for you is that you are actually in control of that, and you get to decide whether or not you want to change that. I'm not saying that you should change that, or that you have to change that, or that it's even always good to change that. I just want to be clear about that. It's just always available to you. It is an option, and it's something that you can choose.

You can also choose, no, you know what? I want to be mad about this. I want to be upset about this. I want to be sad about this. I want to be infuriated by this. I want to feel rage in my heart over this. Totally valid. You are allowed to feel every feeling, any feeling that you want to. Just know that you're choosing it. You can change it anytime you want to.

And what we'll get to in a future episode is the best thing to do then, especially if you're choosing that emotion, is to feel it through and not try to make it better by eating. That's often what we do. We're like, no, I want to be upset about this, but I'm not willing to feel upset. I don't want to just change my thoughts. I would like to just have a glass of wine so I can try to neutralize it and make it all go away.

And same with food. I like to think of it as like, I really want to think this way, then I feel this way, but I want to feel that way. So, how about I just eat and try to stuff it further down inside my body so it can wait for me for later, these emotions? Our bodies tend to become these repositories of unprocessed emotion that we're just stacking food on top, and on top, and on top to keep that all down. And when that's happening, we're like, oh, I'm just not a very emotional person. I'm just not really experiencing that many emotions. It's because the food is in there neutralizing at all. Okay?

So, what it comes down to is you've got thoughts and facts, and you want to figure out what are the actual facts in any situation, and particularly any problem that you're having. One of the best ways to figure that out is to do what I call a thought dump, and it is literally exactly what it sounds like, meaning you're going to dump out your brain. So, you think of that brain having all of those thoughts, and they're all swirling around. And you want to just get it out onto paper, or you can type it as well.

I personally find that writing is better and more effective. There's actually research as well that writing by hand can be more effective. But don't let that stop you if you're like, listen, I'm going to type it or I'm not going to do it, then fine. No problem at all. I've even worked with people who have used transcription software, and they have literally just dictated everything that's in their head, and then they go back and look at it. That's completely fine as well.

So, what you want to do is regularly, i.e. especially when you're first starting out, daily, you want to spend some time just figuring out what's in your head. Like what are all those thoughts? Let's find out what's in there. And so, by dumping, we're not looking for anything specific, necessarily. We're not looking for like the one thought, the extra special whatever. We just want to get it out. We just want to empty that brain out.

I think of it as... A similar experience is if you felt like you had so many things to do, and then you're like, you know what? I just need to create a list. I need to just get this all out of my brain and onto a sheet of paper so I know it's all on there. I'm not going to forget about anything. I don't need to keep trying to remember in my brain because I now have it all on the list. It's very similar to what we're doing here. Rather than the same thoughts swirling, swirling, looping, looping, cycling back and cycling back, we empty them out on paper so we can actually look at them and figure out what we want to do with them.

So, how long does it take to do a thought dump? Totally up to you. I would say start with maybe five minutes. If you're on a roll, you can keep going. Some people really like to go longer, or they start really digging into something and they just keep going and going and going. Other people, I'm like, listen, set a timer for a minute and just go for a minute. Let's just start getting going here without any expectation of what comes out. It literally could just be like, this is what I did today. Great. That's totally fine. We're not going to get upset and think that it needs to be any certain way.

As you get more into the practice of it. You might also ask yourself, what was I upset about today? What things got under my skin or got on my nerves? What ways did I act today I'm not really that proud of? And also, if you had a great day, you can say, why was it great? What was I thinking that made it great? Because it's not the stuff around you that happened that made it great. Right? Those are just the facts. That's neutral. Your thought is that it's great, and that creates a good experience for you.

So, just like it's important to figure out how you may be creating an experience you don't want to have, or a less than comfortable or ideal experience, you're also creating your great experiences. And it can be really good to understand how you're doing that so you can replicate that and recreate that for yourself in the future as well. Okay, so that's thought dumps.

Now let's just talk briefly about beliefs because sometimes we get confused, like what's a thought, what's a belief? And beliefs really are thoughts that you've thought so many times that you believe them. You think they're true. You think that just is the way it is. And sometimes our beliefs can really feel factual. Sometimes we can say, "I believe this, but other people believe different things." Religion is a good example of that. But there are plenty of people who believe very strongly that their religion is the best and it's the right way, and they think that that's a fact.

So, it's important to understand that a belief is still not a fact unless everyone in the world would agree. So, a belief is just something that we have incorporated within us. Often it's down-regulated from your conscious awareness to a more subconscious awareness. Or I shouldn't even say awareness, into a more subconscious level where you aren't so aware about it, where it's just running in the background around and your thoughts are being informed by those beliefs.

So, how do we create beliefs? We can repeat them again and again and again. That's one way of doing it. Often we're indoctrinated into many things. It can be harder as an adult to indoctrinate yourself in something else because it involves literally I think of it as like swimming in the soup. I think it's possible.

You could join a cult or you could join a really intense... some sort of community and really dive in on immersing yourself in their belief system, but most of us are not going to be doing that.

I would say that there's a lot of indoctrination when you go into medicine. It's like this is what the culture is like. It's like sink or swim here. If you want to make it, you've got to basically assimilate to this. But again, if you're already in that, we may want to, what is it, dis-indoctrinate ourselves. Now we want to maybe change those beliefs a little bit. But then also another way to create a belief is to pair it with a very strong emotion. And so, often beliefs that we have created for ourselves or that we operate from even now as adults were created when we were quite young. So, often by the time we're eight years old, many if not most of our core beliefs are already created. And so, let's just say for argument's sake, say I had a fear of very big, tall, strong men, let's just say. And I was okay, but if I saw someone who was particularly muscly and tall, I immediately would feel a little bit of fear, just like this person isn't safe. I don't know. I have to be extra careful around him. Just very leery or wary of that person.

I could look back and say, "Oh, you know what? There was actually someone who was really... like someone in my family who looks similar to that. And when I was six years old, that man really screamed at me and really scared me. And ever since that time, I've had this fear." And so, when we're young, especially those strong emotions. We're just trying to figure the world out. We're like, ooh, that was scary. That's bad. And so, on we go. Right? We still have that belief.

I think I've talked about this before, but I grew up in Southern California until I was about 10, and wildfires were a significant issue regularly. And so, for a variety of reasons, that became really one of my strongest, deepest childhood fears. And to this day, it's not something that is top of mind all the time. But when my 15 year old son this summer was going on a two-week long wilderness adventure in the middle of the back country in the middle of nowhere where there could be fires, I was like, no, but I need to understand exactly what people are going to do to get you out of there. What of a new fire and just develops out of nowhere? There's a lightning strike or whatever and it's right by them, how are they going to get them out?

Other parents, I'm imagining, are not quite so in need of the exact process of what happens. And that is coming from that belief that fire is very scary. Not to say that your belief might be fire isn't scary, but it's a very deep primal fear, like this is bad and you have to get out of it immediately, and you have to do everything you can to not put yourself at risk with fire, where I know other people don't have that strong of a belief around it.

So, the strong emotion component is hard to create for yourself, the indoctrination is hard to create for yourself, but repeating beliefs is one of the best ways for you to create new beliefs for yourself. So, that means potentially writing them every day for a while, reminding yourself of them. I personally like creating a little graphic and putting it on the lock screen of my phone so I'm seeing it. I'm reminding my brain very frequently every time I look at my phone about this thing that I want to believe, this new thing that I want to change in terms of what I believe to be true. And so, it can be useful for us to understand, I have a belief that people like this are like that, or if this happens, it means XYZ. So, understanding what your beliefs are can be really, really useful. And understanding that beliefs still are just thoughts that you believe.

So, let's bring this back here. So, we've got thoughts about facts. Right? There's facts in the world, everyone agrees, and then we have thoughts about those facts that create meaning that help us to know, do we like this, do we not, is this good, is this bad. It's important for us as humans from a survival standpoint to be able to assess a situation quickly and know what to do next. I mean, if you work in any kind of trauma setting, that is basically what you do all the time. I mean, really, doctors are doing that constantly, taking in information and making those decisions. That's what our brains are doing all the time. Just without us asking them to, they're coming up with that meaning.

Then our thoughts are creating our feelings or emotions. Those feelings or emotions are driving our actions. And then what happens when we take action? We get results of some kind. Right? If you do things, or if you don't do things, something will happen. There will be a sequela. There's going to be something that happens, some sort of consequence, some sort of outcome that will come from the action or inaction or reaction. And whatever those results are, those become the new facts.

So, how is this helpful, this thinking cycle? And I mean, I could go on. It's beyond the scope of this Back to Basics episode to get into all the different ways you can use this cycle, because it is really, really awesome, and in my mind, basically the secret to the universe. But what I really want to help you to understand today from a weight loss perspective is how this is playing out in your life all the time. Okay? So, it's not like, oh, I'm going to use the thinking cycle or I'm going to start thinking about having the thinking cycle be a part of my life. The thinking cycle has been in effect in your life from the beginning. It is running in the background all of the time.

So, let's go from the results standpoint. So, let's say you landed yourself on this episode because you were like, okay, my pants, they're too tight, or I'm going to have to size up in scrubs, and that is where I draw the line. That's not going to happen. Somehow something is happening with your weight that you're dissatisfied with. Okay? So, that's the result that you have. Now we can backtrack, because we know that actions create our results. So, what are the actions that you've been taking that are creating those results of the pants being too tight, of the scrubs not fitting anymore?

And so you might look into that go, well, I have been snacking and the doctors lounge a lot more. I've been drinking more alcohol at night. I haven't been prioritizing moving my body or doing any kind of stress release or relief, things that I know helped me. The usual ways that I try to deal with stress I'm not doing, so I'm eating instead when I'm stressed. Right? We can look back and go, yeah, pretty much these are the things that I'm doing. Then we can back it up one more because our feelings are what are driving those actions of overeating and potentially over-drinking. So, how was I feeling when I was doing those things? What was the issue that I thought food or alcohol would solve? What was the problem that it was coming in to fix? Right? What problem do I have that is making me think it's a good idea that I should go eat something even though I'm not hungry. Right? Figuring out what those feelings are.

And then we can back it up. What are the thoughts that are creating those feelings? And this is important to... Don't put a lot of pressure on yourself to get this right immediately. You want to approach this with curiosity. You just want to investigate and try to understand this better. What am I thinking? What was I thinking about work?

What was going on for me before I made the decision to go to the doctor's lounge and eat that stale doughnut that people had cut little pieces off of already? You know what I'm talking about, right? What was going on for me before that? And we're not saying you need to change anything immediately. We're just saying let's just understand it better. Let's just understand how food became the answer in that moment.

And then we can figure out what the facts are. Right? Maybe it's some situation where someone said something to you, and you got upset and you got really frustrated, and you just wanted to think about something else, so you went in and grabbed that hunk of doughnut. And so, we can look at the facts. Okay, well, certain things were said, a certain person said these words, and then I made it mean what? Those are your thoughts. Okay?

Then you can understand, oh, look at this. I'm sitting here going, why are my pants too tight? And yes, it is because of the way you're eating and possibly drinking. But really, what's creating it is the way that you're thinking. That is the real root, the taproot, so to speak. That is the main thing that we need to look at so that we can change those results.

Because the opposite is true as well. When you are either maintaining your ideal weight, where you want to be, or losing weight in the way that you want to be, you are taking different actions than the actions you're taking when you're gaining weight. Right? Different actions. And when you look at what drives those actions, they're different feelings than the feelings that are driving you to overeat and causing weight gain. And when you look at what's causing those feelings, what are those thoughts? They're different thoughts. And those thoughts are always available to you as well. Right?

So, what happens in the vast majority of the weight loss industry is that when you are trying to lose weight, people say, "Okay, what you need to do is you need to do change these things. You need to eat this way, don't eat these things, exercise in this way." That's all the actions. Right? And if you do those things consistently, you probably will get results because most diets will work if you follow them. The issue is why we're not following them. And when we don't know why we're not following them, we need to look at the thoughts and feelings above them.

So, you can force yourself to take different actions for a while and get different results. But if the same thoughts and feelings that drive overeating that you've had in the first place are not dealt with and changed, you will eventually go back to your old way of overeating, overdrinking, those old actions, and you'll create those results that cause weight gain again. So, when you're like, why can I not lose weight and keep it off? This is the reason why. This is why this is so critical and so important.

So, there's lots and lots of ways that this can be used. We use it all the time in my Weight Loss for Doctors Only program. And I would never expect you to become an expert in this immediately, but you really can start to experiment with it. Do a thought dump. Start figuring out what are the facts of what I wrote here. Where are the facts? Let me circle them. And then just sit a moment understanding all this other stuff. These are all thoughts. Interesting.

And then you might ask yourself, okay, when I think that thought, how do I feel? What are the feelings that are being produced from this? You're basically just getting to know yourself in a different way. What are your inner workings? What is your inner emotional life? You're completely out of touch from that if you are grabbing a snack and basically distracting yourself from what's going on for you by eating or drinking.

We have to understand what's going on for you first so that we can start to figure out what we need to change so that it becomes more automatic for you to think the thoughts, feel the feelings, and take the actions that create the result of losing the weight and then maintaining it, which is what causes permanent weight loss, which is what I'm all about. I am not about losing weight and gaining a back again. I'm like, let's solve this problem.

So, this part is infinitely, in my view, more important than how you eat. I mean, I can give you suggestions. I think there's ways that are more comfortable than others. I think there's ways that can be easier than others. But there's lots of ways that you can eat and move your body to get the results that you want. What's way more important is that we address how you're thinking and feeling, and we really do the deep work to figure that out.

So that is the thinking cycle. Have a go at it. Give it a try. See what you think. You can start even going about your day just going like, huh, I can tell that I'm feeling a little anxious. What is my thought that's making me feel anxious? Just start to get in-tune and in touch with what's going on for you. And I know it's going to make a big difference for you.

All right, my friend. Have a great rest of your day. I'm so glad you were here. Thank you for joining me, and I will talk to you next time.

Take care, bye-bye.