Frustrating, isn’t it? In your calm, rational moments, you could list the things you need to do in order to be happy. You can also list the dumb things you’ve done that leaves you miserable. You know them both—the healthy and the unhealthy. Generally you avoid the unhealthy.

And then you don’t.

You and your bathroom scales know you should avoid ice cream at the moment. You avoid the ice cream section at the grocery store. You buy apples instead. You exercise. You celebrate your losses. You walk a little taller.

And then you don’t.

*What happened?* You ask. *I knew better and I did it anyway!*

Why is it that you can commit to doing one thing and then do the opposite, seemingly on a whim? The answer to that question is trapped down deep within you, lurking around the deepest part of your mind. The good news is that with a little effort you effectively confront those inner demons and realize satisfying changes in your life.

In order to begin making those changes, let’s begin with a simple question: Why Do You Do What You DO? And while that question has been debated since the Garden of Eden (*…Eve, you did what?*) lets look at it the problem the way a Cognitive Behavioral therapist would.

Most of your actions begin within the ‘decision center’ of the brain, your prefrontal cortex. There, choices are evaluated, pros and cons weighed and decisions are reached. These decisions might take months or milliseconds.

Once you decide what you will do, your mind visualizes carrying out that decision. The so-called right side of your brain, seeing the future you in that decision, reacts emotionally as if it has already happened. This is because it cannot distinguish between actual reality and visualized reality. It simply reacts to what it ‘saw’.

So, in order for this part of your brain to ‘picture’ a future threat, for instance, it must first fully visualize—view—the possibility in order to determine the danger.

An example would be if you decided to learn to skydive. When you first thought about skydiving, you might have pictured yourself, suspended gracefully from the bottom of a
Why Do I Do What I Do?
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billowing parachute, the world at your feet. Or you might have viewed yourself standing in
triumph on the ground, having successfully completed your jump. Your first emotional reaction,
in response to the decision to skydive, might then be to feel excitement and confidence. Based
on those feelings, you sign up.

Later, however, as you sit in the plane, another thought might go through your mind. As the
time comes to actually jump, you must make the decision to get up from your seat and move to
the open door. In considering all the possibilities, one possible outcome your mind might
consider is that your chute will fail to open. To order to consider the possibility, your visual
mind supplies a terrifying picture of what that might look like. Not a pretty sight!

As a result, your emotional reaction to that picture is no longer excitement or triumph. Its been
replaced by a large amount of fear. As you stand there, your decision to jump or back out will
depend on which picture you believe: floating gracefully from a billowing parachute or running
into the ground without it.

Simply put, you do what you do because of the emotional reactions you have to pictures created
by your thoughts. This chain reaction, thoughts driving emotions which trigger actions, happens
constantly. The idea that, “as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he” is really true.

But wait, you say. There are a lot of times I just seem to react. There was no emotion, I just just
did it. In the same way, people with phobias or addictions also seem to act impulsively. There
didn’t seem to be a thought—just a quick decision followed by an act. And they are right.

Thoughts

The problem lies in the fact that our thoughts, the driving force in all our behaviors, both wise
and stupid, are a far more complex process that we realize.
To begin with, your mind processes information both consciously and unconsciously. Your conscious mind, the thoughts you are currently aware of, has a limited capacity. To use the idea of your computer, it only has so much RAM space to store your short term memory.

Think of the last time you tried to remember the name of the actor who played in a favorite movie. Struggle as you might, you couldn’t remember his name. It was ‘on the tip of your tongue’, but just wasn’t in your conscious memory at that moment. Later then, seemingly out of nowhere, the name you were searching for suddenly came to you. Your unconscious mind had continued to scan your memory long after your conscious mind had turned to other activities. When it located the desired information, it sent it up to your conscious mind.

Just as an iceberg carries the majority of its size below the surface of the water, your mind also carries out most of its daily activity unconsciously, out of your awareness. And, as it turns out, your emotions respond to your unconscious thoughts as readily as they do to your conscience ones.

Are we saying, then, that you base some daily decisions on thoughts you’re not even aware of? Exactly. And most of the time, that is a good thing. We generally call these unconscious thoughts habits or talents. You drive down the road every day without having to consciously think though all the complex steps required to operate a vehicle in rush hour traffic. In truth, your conscious mind is more likely to be listening to the radio or on other things.

The vast majority of the time, unconscious thoughts help you to function normally. Unfortunately, it is also true that many of the these unknown thoughts lead us to do the dumb things we do. This is because we also act on irrational thoughts.
Not long ago, as I watched a baseball game, I saw a set of normally intelligent men doing some pretty dumb things. Close to losing an important game, the team’s best player stood at the plate, waiting for the first pitch. As he did, the rest of his teammates in the dugout all turned their hats inside out and backwards. They were wearing, as they later described it, their ‘rally caps’. Soon the fans were doing the same thing.

Logically, it is hard to explain just how a group of grown men might believe that how they wear their caps might enable their teammate to better see and hit a 95-mile an hour fastball. Realistically, they know it really doesn’t make any difference. But they did it anyway, hoping it might help.

The same thing can occur when a 140 pound phobic woman sees a 6 ounce garden snake. If she has a fear of snakes, no amount of rational thought will change her predictable behavior. *What are you afraid of? He’s more scared of you than you are of him! And he’s not even poisonous!*

You act on irrational thoughts just as you do with your rational ones. Irrational thoughts cause emotional reactions in the brain as effectively as do rational ones. When you do that, you base your decisions on faulty, erroneous data—and then wonder why you did it....

Now we are finally to the heart of the question: Why do I do dumb things? Your irrational thoughts can be conscious as well as unconscious; thoughts you know of as well as thoughts you are not. And your emotions—and your actions—will be driven by both.

The baseball players and fans were very aware of their *conscious, irrational behavior*. They knew it made very little sense to do what they were doing, but they did it anyway. The same is true of a man I sat next to on a airplane. As we took off, he was terrified, gripping the seat and hyperventilating. When I asked him about it, he replied, “I know this is dumb. I can quote you all the statistics that say that flying is safer than driving. But take-offs and landings still scare me to death!”
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The driving force, though, behind your seemly poor decision making, comes then from your *unconscious, irrational thoughts*. Out of your awareness, they nevertheless drive a range of emotions you act on, but cannot explain why.

Generally, you will not recognize just how irrational a thought is until you look more closely at it. For instance, the teenage boy who believes himself to be stupid and unlikable might be basing that belief on one rejection from a one girl he really likes. As a result of that *thought*, he *feels* depressed and worthless. In response, he may *act* by then isolating himself from others and reducing his social interaction.

However, once he fully recognizes the reality of his good grades and many friends, he can begin to think differently about himself: *The truth is that I’m not stupid and unlikable. I’m just not liked by a girl I like. Her decision doesn’t change the reality of who I really am.* Finally, he will see that those assumptions were a distortion of his true self—an *irrational* and destructive self picture that drove him to discouraged isolation, which then made him feel even worse!

Again, your emotions and behaviors respond to unconscious thoughts as quickly as they do to your conscious ones. Irrational thoughts will paint a distorted picture of you and what you deserve. Like the story of the skydiver, your brain then visualizes any destructive outcomes and you emotionally react—to a lie. What follows are poor decisions, all based on false assumptions about you.

At this point you’re probably asking two all-important questions: if these irrational thoughts are so unhealthy, 1) *where did they come from?* and 2) *what do I do about them?* Both good questions.

Where do unconscious, irrational thoughts come from? Most are very old, dating back to false assumptions you made about yourself at critical points in your early life. Much of our personality is intact by age 4 or 5; our self image by 14 or 15. Emotional reactions to traumatic events, toxic relationships, even ‘one-time experiences’, all can play a role in planting false thoughts within a vulnerable young mind. One underweight woman, who believed herself to be ‘fat’, finally realized that she first started that belief due to a comment made to her as a 14 years old teen, by a teasing admirer. Though it was never true, she nevertheless incorporated it into her fragile self image as fact. Then, year after year she has continued to make poor decisions based on that ‘reality’.
In reality, you do not have to remember or discover the original source of an irrational thought in order to eliminate its grip over your emotions. Healing comes by identifying it, challenging it and replacing it.

**Capturing Unconscious, Irrational Thoughts**

The second question is much more important. How do I discover an unconscious thought—if it is unconscious? This is not as difficult as it sounds. Again, remember that emotions are driven by thoughts. And *negative unconscious thoughts produce negative emotions*.

It is safe to say that when you are feeling depressed and discouraged you are currently being affected by those thoughts. These negative times may enable you to ‘capture’ them as they are in the process of influencing your emotions. You might hear them as a random disparaging thought—*you never will be lovable, people secretly hate you, you’ll always be stupid*—which attacks you and then submerges again.

Keep a journal close by during those moments. When you are aware of these thoughts write them down so that you may challenge and replace them later on. Leave it on your nightstand so that you can quickly jot down thoughts you hear late at night or early in the morning. These are critical times because your conscious mind is more relaxed and these unconscious ideas can push past them into your awareness.

It is important to note that simple identification of these unconscious, irrational thoughts does not immediately change your life and eliminate all chances of making any stupid decisions later on. There is no magic pill or memory that will automatically transform you. In all likelihood, these destructive thoughts have influenced you for many years, often playing a role in your unhealthy decisions. Bad habits, such as procrastination; fears, such as phobias, may have wound themselves tightly into your personality, habits and routines. They may also play a dominate role in your relationships, who you choose to spend time with or decide to marry.

**Replacement**
But, capturing these thoughts will enable you to begin the process of seeing their falsehood and their effect on your daily life. With this knowledge you can begin to replace them. In order to this, simply try the following exercise. Go to the Resources Tab here at Kevinhinckleylpc.com. Download the Irrational Thoughts sheet. Fill out the top portion as you become aware of these thoughts, along with the emotional and decision making consequences of each thought. Then fill out the bottom portion of the sheet, replacing each irrational thought with the reality, emotional reaction and potential decision/actions for each one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thoughts</th>
<th>Irrational Thoughts</th>
<th>Emotional Reaction</th>
<th>Potential Decisions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I always fail</td>
<td>Stay discouraged</td>
<td>Never try anything</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More hopeful</td>
<td>Try something new</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use this sheet to chart out the thoughts you capture, then replace them as you hear them or feel their effect on you.

**Caution!**

Capturing and recording these thoughts begins the process of replacing them with the truth. And it is only the beginning. Acting on these new truths will be uncomfortable. The ‘true you’ will challenge you to not only think differently, but to make different decisions.

If you determine to move ahead, rather than stay miserable, it will change your relationships. Those around you could be resistant to your
changes. Your changes will require them to change also if they are going to maintain a relationship with you. It is possible that you sought out their friendship under a false idea of who you are. But, to see you differently is to see them differently as well.

It is for this reason that marriages often see the greatest impact of these changes. Chances are, if you have been acting on irrational, unconscious thoughts, your life has had some pretty difficult moments. You may be also struggling to be happy in your marriage. For this reason, it will be important to communicate a great deal with your spouse, letting them know exactly what you are learning about yourself. This will enable you to clearly keep them current as your expectations change—both of you and of them.

**In Conclusion**

In the end, you are who you are because of what you think about yourself. Your emotions are closely tied to this internal viewpoint. Happiness becomes a process of seeing yourself more clearly and more rationally. This clarity will fill you with a sense of freedom and will enable you to make healthier choices in your life.