



Activity Nineteen: On Thoughts and Emotions

Purpose:

This exercise will help you identify and process the many thoughts and feelings that come up during transition and throughout the stages of culture shock.

Introduction:

Does this scenario sound familiar? You're out for a walk (or up late at night, or cooking dinner, or driving to work) and a million and one thoughts are racing through your mind. This isn't unique to expats, but for expats it includes the additional mental clutter that is passports and plane tickets and moving boxes and school changes and time changes and...well, you know how it goes.

The challenge with all of this mental processing (besides the fact that it's exhausting) is that it either extends or crowds out what is really happening emotionally. Here's an example:

Let's say you find out that your home's Internet access will be down for three days. You've just moved and you're missing your best friend terribly. When you hear the Internet will be down and you'll miss a Skype session you had scheduled with her, you feel sad. Suddenly, your brain kicks into gear – "This is crazy! How can the Internet be down for three days! Someone is not doing his job! This is because we've just moved here! They don't care about us new people!" You might fire off a quick (and maybe regrettable) email to whomever you think may be responsible. You might yell at your kids. Perhaps you complain openly and negatively to someone in your spouse's office – hoping your annoyance will be conveyed onward.

So there are two things working here. On the one hand, you're extending the original emotion of sadness – drawing it out, perhaps even turning it into anger, resentment, frustration, etc. You've made it bigger and more painful than it may have been. On the other hand, the emotion (and the time to really sit with it) is being crowded out in your mind and heart by all of the thoughts you have around it. And, these two aspects work in conjunction – feeding each other. The more you think about how frustrated you are, the more upset you become. The more upset you become, the more likely your brain is to go into overdrive looking for answers. And, when we are in a vulnerable position (like living or working outside our home culture), it's even easier to let our emotions and then our thoughts overtake us.

But, there's hope. This exercise will help you create a framework for identifying thoughts versus emotions and then give you a strategy for dealing with them in the moment. It is based in the concepts of mindfulness meditation. You can find great information on mindfulness meditation on the web and in print. If you like this exercise, consider doing some Internet searching to learn more about these ideas and the practice of mindfulness meditation.

Instructions:

- 1) In this first step, you will spend some time getting honest with your emotions. Of course, on a daily basis any one person can feel a whole range of emotions so this list may not necessarily be exhaustive. However, in the spaces below, choose 5-10 emotions that you feel are more or less everyday feelings for you. Then, to the right describe how those emotions usually feel for you physically (in other words, what signs is your body giving you that these emotions are present). It may or may not come easily to describe the physical sensation of the emotions. It may be necessary to take some time noticing the emotions when they're happening before trying to tackle the list. List both "positive" and "negative" emotions. Two examples are provided.

Emotion	Description
<i>Happiness</i>	<i>I feel butterflies in my stomach. My feet move like they want to dance. My face naturally breaks into a smile.</i>
<i>Frustration</i>	<i>I grind my teeth. Sometimes I feel like it's difficult to hold back tears. I get tense in my neck and shoulders.</i>

2) The next step in this activity is to begin to label the parts of your personality that are driven by thoughts. Think of these parts of yourself as mini-professionals living inside you. There's the professional worrier, the fixer, the planner, the escape artist, etc. etc. You'll notice these parts of you when you're doing lots and lots of thinking. In the spaces below, think of 4-5 prominent parts of your personality and give them names. You can get really creative on this. It's okay to make up brand new words – your own special part of you. Then, in the spaces to the right, list 2-3 typical or recent thoughts that are representative of that part of yourself. A couple of examples are provided.

The Mini-Professional	Example Thoughts
<i>The Worrier</i>	<i>"The healthcare in our new country might be really lacking. What if the kids get sick? Will we have access to doctors?" "My wife is traveling for 2 weeks. What if something happens to her? How will I be able to care for the children alone?"</i>
<i>The Judge</i>	<i>"These people who have just moved here don't understand anything about this country. Isn't this common sense!?" "No one ever comes to visit us here! If my family lived abroad, I would always make the effort. It's like they don't even care."</i>

- 3) Congratulations! Step 1 and Step 2 are probably the most challenging parts of this exercise. It can be difficult to distinguish thoughts from feelings – the two are so intertwined. But, what you have now done is created (first) a framework for identifying emotions when they crop up and (second) categories into which you can place all of those thoughts that can overtake your mental space.

Completing the first two parts of this exercise has likely kicked off some personal growth already. Oftentimes, we're not even aware of what is going on in our hearts and our minds. But, the growth does not have to stop there.

The next step in this process is to begin to cultivate more regular awareness around these emotions and thoughts when they're happening. In many ways, simply acknowledging and using the labels and categories you've created provides you with an incredible opportunity for getting more in tune with your own perceptions and experience. When you say to yourself "I'm feeling really sad. My stomach is in knots and I want to cry. And, now I'm starting to worry that my relationships with my friends back home are going to start to suffer because of the distance between us. And now I'm worrying about how this lifestyle affects my children," you're connecting directly with (1) the real emotion as it is happening and (2) the thought patterns that come from and then reinforce that emotion.

Because this exercise represents ongoing work, the process for making it work for you in the long-term is up to you. For Step 3, choose one of the suggested activities below and try it out. Give yourself a time frame for putting the activity into place. Monitor not only your progress with the activity itself, but also any growth or insight you have around your thoughts and emotions, and how they play out in your daily life (a journal can be great for this). Be flexible – if one of the suggested activities doesn't work for you, try something else. Be creative – give yourself the space to modify the activity if you feel like something else would work better. Be patient and forgiving – the activity you're undertaking may represent a huge stretch for you, so it's really okay if some days (or even most days) things don't go exactly as you had hoped.

Suggestions for cultivating awareness for every day:

- (1) Find a time to practice some form of daily meditation. Five, ten or fifteen minutes is fine. The goal here is to find a quiet place, where you won't be interrupted. When there, simply spend some time noticing and naming the thoughts and emotions that arise. As you bring this in to your life, you may find that you would prefer to do a longer practice – that's fine too.
- (2) Name that feeling! Name that mini-professional at work in your brain! This is probably one of the least intrusive activities to try because you can really do it any time and any where with very little change in your schedule. The biggest challenge is remembering to do it. Practice this activity by naming (out loud or to yourself) which emotions and thoughts patterns are present in a given situation. For example, if you find yourself walking into work feeling tense, with butterflies in your stomach – you might say in your head, "anxious." You might also notice that you're calculating costs for your next move, so you might name the mini-professional – "that's The Planner in me." If you can find times to do this here and there, you'll notice you get better at it and that with time

you will become more and more aware of your daily emotional and cognitive habits.

- (3) Do some things, each day, on purpose. This is about cutting out some of your multi-tasking so that you can create a greater awareness of what's happening in the moment. It doesn't just mean taking time to stop checking your email – while cooking dinner and helping your daughter practice her spelling words – it means taking time to do *one thing* and to have all of your emotional and mental energy focused just on that one thing. Take brushing your teeth for example. Instead of simply brushing away, take time to notice how you're feeling emotionally. Stressed because you're late for work? Happy because the day is winding down and you're looking forward to getting in bed with a good book? Also look at what thoughts are running through your head and acknowledge which mini-professional is running the show. Then, take time to greet and name these thoughts and feelings (just a simple, "Yes, hello there anxiety.") and then redirect your energy fully back to the task at hand, paying full attention to the experience of that task.

- (4) Make some introductions! In all situations, we benefit from making a human connection. While it can be difficult to open up to people, more often than not, when we do we find that we face common emotions, thoughts and challenges. So, for this activity, introduce some of the emotions or mini-professionals you've become acquainted with in this exercise to a friend. What does that mean exactly? This is about taking time to show your true and authentic self to those around you – especially the people that matter most. That doesn't, of course, mean sharing in ways in which you're not comfortable, but it can mean sharing in a way that is slightly outside of the norm for you. So, for example, let's say you're struggling with stress over your next move, but your inclination is to keep that discomfort to yourself. Instead of holding all of this in, tell a friend, your spouse/partner or family member. And, this is true for sharing your mini-professionals as well. It's okay to say things like, "The micro-manager in me is really needing to have this project finished. Even though this is a holiday, I'm going to take 30 minutes to put in a little bit of work." When you own up to these parts of yourself, you're moving towards freeing yourself from the burden of solo mental struggle and emotional isolation, and you'll find this skill becoming a major asset in all aspects of your life.