

BY BRUCE K. FORDHAM  
LDS Family Services

Perhaps it's a familiar scenario: a child repeatedly opens a cupboard door even though you have told her—several times—to stop. A field goal kicker misses the goal even when he has thought to himself, “Don’t miss it. Don’t miss it. Don’t miss it.” Or perhaps you eat a piece of chocolate cake even though in passing through the kitchen, you tell yourself, “Don’t eat that.”

Why does this happen?

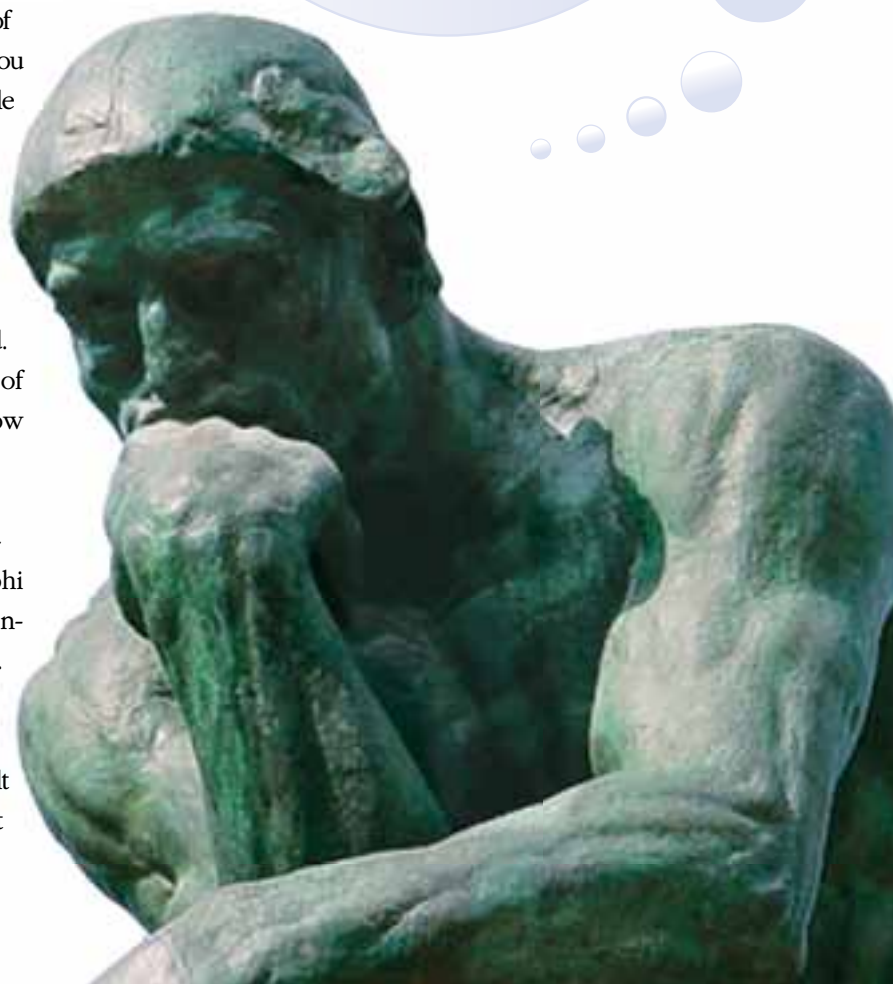
Think about how *you* respond to a negative or inappropriate thought that comes into your mind, either as a result of unhealthy thought patterns or simply because you are a natural man or woman (see Mosiah 3:19; D&C 67:12). Perhaps you reprimand yourself. Or maybe you repeatedly tell yourself to stop thinking about that subject. In the case of the first response, you unwittingly weaken your resistance to such thoughts and lower your sense of self-worth and confidence. With the second response, you unknowingly give energy and strength to the undesirable thought by repeating its image. This occurs because our brains are unable to replace something with nothing. When there is not another thought or activity to replace a negative one, the thought to open the cupboard or miss the field goal or eat the cake takes root because of the image’s repetition in the vulnerable mind.

Of course, missing a field goal or having a piece of chocolate cake aren’t evil, but these examples of how our minds work hold true in cases where thoughts *are* inappropriate. We know that one of the ways Satan influences us to work against ourselves, seeking to make us “miserable like unto himself” (2 Nephi 2:27), is by promoting the idea that our thoughts control us rather than that we can control our thoughts. This, of course, is a great deception.

So how can we overpower undesirable thoughts? In the Book of Mormon, we read that Captain Moroni built fortifications ahead of time to defend his people against

# THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT

*Do you ever feel as though your thoughts control you—not the other way around? It doesn't have to be that way.*



their enemies (see Alma 50:1–6, 10). We can follow his example by also preparing ahead of time to protect our minds from the influence of evil thoughts. The following two techniques have worked for clients counseled by experienced therapists.

First, we can treat the thought with indifference, preventing it from developing or becoming engaging to our minds.<sup>1</sup>

Second, we can replace the negative idea with a wholesome thought or activity. For example, President Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has suggested memorizing a favorite hymn as an “emergency channel,” a place for thoughts to go when inappropriate subjects come to mind.<sup>2</sup> Keeping handy a list of possible replacement activities may also be useful.

When the human brain is introduced to any new activity, it begins to build a new pathway. The more often the activity is repeated, the more solid and automatic that pathway becomes. An analogy might further explain this concept:

You are standing at the edge of the jungle and know that you must find a way through it. You notice that a path, well worn and easy to travel, has already been cut through the undergrowth for you. But then you notice signs warning of dangers lurking at the end of the path, and even though it appears to be the easiest route, you determine that it might be best to forge your own path. You pull out a machete and start hacking through the thick growth and underbrush. It's tough work! When you glance up and again notice the path that has already been cut, you become discouraged. But you persevere, eventually carving out your own path. You use it frequently as you traverse the jungle, and in time it becomes the obvious, preferred path. Meanwhile, the original well-worn path—the one with danger at the end—deteriorates from lack of use.

The jungle, of course, represents our brains; the initial well-worn path is the route of our undesirable thoughts. The new path represents our efforts to forge new and righteous thoughts, habits, and behaviors.

Granted, these techniques for managing thoughts may not stop undesirable ideas from coming into our minds; dealing with such thoughts is one of the consequences of living in a fallen world. However, when the thoughts do come, these two

methods can help us more quickly and decisively dismiss them.

In our world of ever-increasing evil and more sophisticated assaults on our thoughts, this practice can be useful in providing additional strength against self-defeating thought patterns and habits. With diligent effort, managing our thoughts can become natural. We'll be able to fortify ourselves against attacks of the adversary, just as Captain Moroni did, and we will be able to come off conquerors (see D&C 10:5). ■

#### NOTES

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Grant Gudmundson, whose ideas helped shape this concept.
2. Boyd K. Packer, “Inspiring Music—Worthy Thoughts,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1974, 28.



#### THE STAGE OF OUR MINDS

*“The mind is like a stage. During every waking moment the curtain is up. There is always some act being performed on that stage. It may be a comedy, a tragedy, interesting or dull, good or bad; but always there is some act playing on the stage of your mind.*

*“Have you noticed that shady little thoughts may creep in from the wings and attract your attention in the middle of almost any performance and without any real intent on your part? These delinquent thoughts will try to upstage everybody. If you permit them to go on, all thoughts of any virtue will leave the stage. You will be left, because you consented to it, to the influence of unrighteous thoughts. . . . When they have the stage, if you let them, they will devise the most clever persuasions to hold your attention. They can make it interesting all right, even convince you that they are innocent, for they are but thoughts. What do you do at a time like that, when the stage of your mind is commandeered by theimps of unclean thinking, whether they be the gray ones that seem almost clean or the filthy ones that leave no room for doubt? If you can fill your mind with clean and constructive thoughts, then there will be no room for these persistentimps, and they will leave.”*

**President Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Worthy Music, Worthy Thoughts,” *New Era*, Apr. 2008, 8.**