The Counseling Hut

PO Box 50113, Eugene, OR 97401
541-342-8144 (Phone/TTY) 541-342-1724 (Fax)
http://www.thecounselinghut.org/

The Toad

Jordan J. Shin, MS, LPC
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What Is the Toad?

The idea for the toad came from a *Saturday Night Live* skit titled "Theodoric of York, Medieval Barber". In this skit, Steve Martin plays a medieval barber/doctor who is seeing patients. At one point, a concerned mother brings in her daughter, and reports that none of the prescribed treatments have worked. Somewhat baffled, the doctor orders another round of bloodletting, and says to the mother:

> You know, medicine is not an exact science, but we are learning all the time. Why, why, just fifty years ago, we would have thought your daughter's illness was brought on by demonic possession or witchcraft. [The mother laughs contemptuously.] But nowadays we know that Isabelle is suffering from an imbalance of bodily humors, perhaps caused by a toad [...] living in her stomach.

The thing is, the toad exists! It lives not in your stomach, but in your brain. It creates an imbalance not of your bodily humors, but of your mind. Everyone has a toad; some toads are weak and feeble, and some are well-fed and strong, but they are everywhere. It survives by sending you random thoughts, feelings, or moods. If you "catch" the thought, feeling, or mood, believe it to be true, and make it your thought, feeling, or mood, the toad is rewarded; it is *fed*. If you ignore the toad, sadly, the toad starves, for the moment. The toad works hard at times, trying to come up with something new that you will catch. Sometimes it is lazy, and keeps sending up the same old stuff. The more you catch them, the stronger the toad gets, and the

more thoughts the toad can send, and the more of them you will catch.

The toad is not very smart. It does not know what these thoughts mean; it is just smart enough to know that when it sends you certain thoughts, it will be well fed. It has no idea how you should feel or what mood you should be in; it just knows that *you* will find a reason to feel a certain way or be in a certain mood. It can be creative at times, coming up with some rather bizarre ideas. A lot of the times, you won't even understand what the toad is trying to suggest, and you will ignore it. Mostly, however, it has an excellent memory, and it will stick with what works.

Although it might seem like the toad is trying to get you, the toad does not have any goal or agenda other than to survive. It isn't trying to control you or tell you what to do. It is not evil; it isn't trying to destroy you. It isn't trying to discover deep truths or to keep you ignorant. It just wants to be fed.

In depression, anxiety, and in some forms of mania and psychosis, we are constantly plagued by "automatic thoughts" and "automatic feelings and moods" sent up by the toad. These are thoughts and feelings that pop into our head or take over our body, with no discernible reason, and with no reasonable explanation. (Actually, there is sort of a reason, which I will explain later.)

The best way to break out of, or even prevent, depression, anxiety, mania, and some forms of psychosis, is to ignore the toad. Yes, it's that simple. Well, it's not that simple. It's hard work, and takes a lot of practice, especially if the toad has trained you well to be a good feeder. And, unfortunately, you can never get rid of the toad. The toad will always be there, trying to

get fed. Nevertheless, you can certainly make it weaker, starve it to a point where it can't do you any real damage. It'll be annoying, but not problematic. This much can be done.

Automatic Thoughts from the Toad

My (least) favorite automatic thought goes likes this:

> I see there some dog poop on the sidewalk. I'd better be careful not to step on it. If I get it on my work shoes, it's going to be *impossible* to clean it off. It's gonna still smell, like, for days. Darn it, there is dog poop on the sidewalk *all the time*. What is this world coming to? What is the world trying to do to me? I'm going to be a *&^%ing mess, 'cause these dog owners don't give a &^%^ about ...

You get the picture. A stream of thoughts that starts with a reasonable observation about a real event quickly degenerates into panic-stricken, depressing anger, according to which everything, and I mean *everything*, is going wrong.

Here, "I'd better be careful not to step on it" is a perfectly reasonable precaution. When I start talking about "it's going to be *impossible* to clean it off", I'm exaggerating, and there begins my plight.

The thing is, once I sit down and carefully consider these exaggerated thoughts, I can easily see that it is rather silly. I don't, in fact, believe it, although, in the moment, I *feel as if* it's the world's most profound truth!

I have caught the toad's thought, and I caught it good, and I wallow in the feeling that this series of thoughts brings to me, and I can almost feel the toad reclining in near-ecstacy as the nourishment keeps coming in.

Or, I can think to myself, "Oh, that's the toad's thought", and think and do no more than what is necessary: carefully walk around the dog poop on the sidewalk, and keep an eye on the sidewalk in case there is more. Problem solved. The world is OK. The toad pouts in disappointment, and sulks pitifully.

Automatic Feelings from the Toad

I have many allergies, and that means I get an instant headache whenever I get a whiff of, for instance, wisteria blossoms. There is a beautiful wisteria vine in my neighborhood, and I pass by it often. In the spring, it happens almost daily that the scent of the wisteria reaches my nose, and, even before I can consciously smell it, I have a dull headache in my sinuses, and my mood crumbles. I start looking for a reason why I'm having such a bad day, and I find it:

> Perhaps it's something what's-his-name said yesterday at dinner; yes, that was so hurtful and horrible. Disrespectful. Insulting. Perhaps I should bring this up with him right away. Something like, "You know, you *always* say things like that whenever we get together, and I need you to cut that out. *All* the times I could have said something just as mean to you, I've stopped myself, and I want you to show me the courtesy and respect..."

OK. So, here, I really didn't have any problems, going my own merry way, but, spray some wisteria perfume on my sinus, and, suddenly, I have always had horrible problems with some *no-good*, so-called friend who *never* does *anything* right.

In this example, the trigger was physical: an allergic reaction resulting in a minor headache. Before I could remember that I get this headache whenever I am near wisteria blossoms—in

fact, even before my body has had a chance to even start an allergic reaction—the toad steps in. It doesn't even bother to tell me that the world is a horrible place. It just sends me a "bad mood", and sits back, and waits. Sensing this bad mood, I start looking for reasons to feel bad. Surely, one does not get depressed without a good, depressing reason! What could it be? And I find—actually, *invent*—a very good reason to get depressed. And then I get depressed. I am doing the toad's work, and the toad is richly rewarded.

Of course, it's harder work for the toad to send a feeling or a mood than to send a thought, so most toads tend to do it sparingly. Still, a strong, well-fed toad can send up an entire depressive episode any time it wants to, wisteria or no wisteria. Out of the blue.

The automatic feelings and moods are harder to fight off; you can't just up and stop a feeling. Still, if you refuse to believe the feeling or mood, and keep reminding yourself that it's the toad sending it up, you can stop your train of thought before it starts. Just don't "go there". If the train of thoughts starts, then the feeling or mood will have a reason to stay. However, once the thoughts are stopped, the feelings and moods don't have a reason to stay. After a while, the toad will wear itself out trying to keep the feeling up, and give up.

Sure, Great, but What Is the Toad, Really?

The toad is essentially a group of nerves that have become accustomed to a certain pattern. Human brains—indeed, probably all animal brains on this planet worth its name—are designed to recognize patterns, and to do so as efficiently as possible. If a group of nerves happen to work together to recognize useful patterns, those nerves become stronger, more permanent. It becomes more and more efficient as more and

more events fit the pattern. In the end, the more certain things happen and the more your brain responds in a certain way, the more your brain will respond that way to those things.

These nerves may be located together in a small section of the brain; more likely, they form a complex web across many sections of the brain. Here are some parts of the brain that may be involved in your toad.

The limbic system
Also known as the "emotional brain", the limbic system is designed to quickly recognize important patterns using minimal information. It hardly thinks; it sees a pattern, and generates a feeling. One of its most important function is the "fight, flight, or freeze" response: to quickly recognize danger and respond to it. If there is a monkey wrench or a saber-tooth tiger flying your way, you have to do something, anything, immediately, and the limbic system makes it happen. It turns up your heart rate and makes your breathing fast and shallow; adrenaline pumps up and your muscles are readied for action. It also turns off the "thinking" parts of your brain; thinking will only get in the way if there really is a saber-tooth tiger coming at your neck. Instinctively, you respond. Whatever you do to successfully get away, the limbic system remembers that, the next time something comes after your neck, you should do that same thing again, without thought, within an instant. If it turns out that there was no saber-tooth tiger, of course, then the system turns off, and the limbic system may not be so quick to respond next time.

So the automatic thoughts sent up by the toad is a "best guess" attempt by the limbic system to come up with a quick-witted, helpful, and timely response to every situation. Coming up with an almost-instinctive, instantaneous response is what it does best. However, evaluating whether the decision was a good one

or not is not its strength; the other parts of the brain need to supply that information. Whenever its suggestions are taken up by the rest of the brain, it files the event away in a quick-access file for the next time it will come in handy. If the rest of the brain feels ho-hum about the suggestion, the limbic system will act a bit calmer the next time.

The limbic system learns quickly, but forgets slowly. It will take many "safe" encounters with saber-tooth tigers to get rid of the memory of one "real" attack. That makes sense; we don't want to take any chances of something bad happening again. However, the limbic system can also overreact, and it's up to the rest of the brain to train it back to a reasonable level of alertness.

The prefrontal cortex

The limbic system is not the only part of the brain sending up "best guess" ideas. All parts of the brain are constantly working on coming up with new ideas and thoughts, each one according to the information it has. As you ride on a bus going down a street, the part of the brain most connected to your eyes may be thinking, "car, car, bike, car, pedestrian, red light, green light, car, car, bus stop, car, car, yellow line". The part of the brain most connected to your ears may be thinking," honk, rev, hum, honk, passenger, bus stop, honk, rev, brake". Your nose-brain may be thinking, "diesel oil, B.O., exhaust, vinyl, diesel oil, bagel". Another part of your brain might be working on your finances, while another one goes over your last conversation with someone, and yet another one is going through list of things to do. All chattering away at the same time. Chatter. Chatter. Chatter.

So how is it that you are only conscious of one thought, which may be, "Oh, here comes my stop" or "Looks like I will be late"? All of the "mini thought" suggestions being sent up by all

of the parts of your brain gets juggled and sorted and weighed and judged by the prefrontal cortex, which is a network of nerves connecting all parts of your brain. Out pops one thought that is judged to be the most important, and that becomes your conscious thought; all others are kept out of consciousness.

Like all parts of the brain, the prefrontal cortex also develops a pattern. We all tend to respond in somewhat predictable ways to certain situations; this tendency is called our "personality", and your personality is defined by which kinds of thought your prefrontal cortex tends to prefer. If your prefrontal cortex tends to listen to the parts of the brain more connected to your senses, you are more likely to be aware of and responsive to your surrounding. If your prefrontal cortex tends to choose the parts of the brain more involved with thoughts unrelated to your surrounding, you may be more removed, more abstract. If your prefrontal cortex loves to listen to your limbic system, you may be more nervous and more reactive.

The prefrontal cortex also makes room for creative, imaginary thoughts; since the brains are only making "best guesses", many of your mini-thoughts are not entirely grounded in reality. Still, they should be given some attention, because among those unrealistic thoughts may be a creative solution to a difficult situation. If you cannot get away from reality once in while, you will be stuck in your patterns.

The problem is, the prefrontal cortex can give too much weight to the creative, imaginary thoughts. Perhaps I should consider the possibility that there is dog poop everywhere I go; if it is true, I need to be more careful. Perhaps I should consider signing up for a fanciful investment opportunity; if it seems likely to work out, that would be, well, fabulous. These are useful thoughts to have. Nevertheless, when these thoughts

become the entirety of my consciousness, I am in big trouble. I will end up being a nervous wreck wherever I walk. I will be a reckless investor who throws everything away. If these thoughts become overwhelming, I will in fact be delusional; I will see dog poop where there isn't any, and I will have a completely unrealistic view of my financial future. In extreme cases, I will see or hear or believe things that aren't really there.

Training the prefrontal cortex is as tricky as training the limbic system. After all, the decision to retrain the prefrontal cortex itself needs to come into your conscious thought, i.e., be chosen by your prefrontal cortex. Still, it can be done; the part of your brain concerned with reading is probably speaking up quite loudly right now, and there are likely other parts of your brain who heartily agree. Let those voices speak.

In general, our brains are "rewarded" not by the logical merit of the creative ideas it generates, but by our emotional response to the ideas. Emotions come from beliefs. When something seems good, just, comforting, or liberating, we have positive emotions. When something seems bad, unjust, disturbing, or constraining, we have negative emotions. We need to make sure that our emotional response to a creative idea is really based on whether something really is good, just, comforting, or liberating.

Also bear in mind that what may be a good solution to one situation may not be in another, seemingly similar situation. Train your brain to consider all options, not just the ones that felt good before. Don't let it settle into too firm a groove. Habits and patterns are useful, but flexibility sure comes in handy at times.

How to Recognize Toad Thoughts

All thoughts that are unreasonable under even casual inspection are, as such, toad thoughts. Here are some words and phrases that should clue you in:

- Have to, should, must, must never...
- Always/Never/Now or Never...
- It's all (your favorite scapegoat here)'s fault...
- It's all going to be terribly bad...
- Damned if I do damned if I don't...
- I have no choice...

If you think about it, a sentence that contains these words can hardly ever be absolutely true. You can be pretty sure that these thoughts are toad thoughts. Take, for instance, the toad thought I am having this very instance: "I have to finish typing this paragraph before I take my shower."

> *Is someone holding a gun to my head and telling me that I will die if I don't finish typing this right this second?* No. In fact, I'd better take a shower and get going, and my kid is patiently waiting for me to get ready so we can go grocery shopping. I'm just afraid that if I don't do this right now, I will forget that I just came up with a fabulous example of a toad thought, and I will never be able to come up with another one just as good. *Wait, you will* never *be able to?* Well, actually, no... I mean... it's just that it's such a good example... *So what you are saying is you want to do this, and you are taking advantage of your kid's patience to write something down that seems pretty good at the moment*. Ummm... sure. Yeah. Oh, never mind, I guess I should just get going. *Should?* I mean, I guess it would be better to get going. Besides, I'm pretty good at coming up with examples, and this isn't the first time I had to interrupt my work. Fine. Whatever.

Even if someone were holding a gun to my head, in fact, I do not *have to* do anything. I still have a choice. The choices aren't that great, but I still have a choice. It is just that it's probably better to do what the gun-holder says; if it is not, I wouldn't do it. So, whenever the toad tells you you *have to* do something, and you largely agree, try to say to yourself, "Well, it would be better for me to do that", or "I would really rather do that". At times, you might want to say, "Well, I *want to* do that".

Toad Thoughts and Mood

A lot of toad thoughts are tailor made for you, and only you would take them seriously. "Our president is the Antichrist" or "Our president is going God's work" may be a toad thought for some people, and completely meaningless to others. You never can tell with other people, but you can tell for yourself. Generally, you can tell a thought is a toad thought when it makes you dwell on it, thinking about it over and over although you know thinking more about it isn't really going to make much of a difference. You can also tell a thought is a toad thought when it escalates; either things seem worse and worse the more you think about it, or things get more and more exciting the more you think about it. Some toad thoughts make you do something right away, without any thought, or make you do nothing at all. All in all, toad thoughts are not balanced; they are extreme, and unreasonably so.

Broadly speaking, toad thoughts that lead to depression tend to be "negative" thoughts, usually a criticism or rejection of your worth as a human being, your competence, your behavior, your choices, or anything having to do with you. "I never do anything right" is a world-favorite classic. "This world is never going to work for me" is another. The word "never" is a dead giveaway, of course, but these statements also cannot be made to sound

reasonable. "So-and-so will never go out with me", despite the word "never", may be a realistic, if a bit depressing, thought. "So-and-so will never go out with me, and that means my life will be meaningless" is an unnecessary judgment on your future.

Toad thoughts that lead to mania tend to be "exciting" thoughts, usually having to do with something urgent. You may feel compelled to do something that *must* be done right away. It might be something that does need to be done some time soon, such as when a deadline is approaching, but your sense of urgency might be over the top. Maybe you feel like you have to finish something, even though you know it is better to stop. It might be something that would be really nice to be done with soon, such as cleaning the house, returning an outfit that doesn't quite fit right, or grabbing that bargain on something you really want, but you may feel like the world will be over if you don't do it right now. Then there is the world-famous "money burning a hole in your pocket" phenomenon. You may feel like you have to buy something, anything, and right away, since, if you don't, the money will be gone soon, all wasted on boring things like rent and groceries and retirement accounts. What about sex? There is a fine line between romantic spontaneity and impulsive recklessness.

Toad thoughts that lead to anxiety and panic tend to be "scary" thoughts. The world is, to be sure, full of danger. There are many things to worry about. Is your worrying proportional to the danger? You may be worried about people lurking in the bushes at night, especially if you are in a place where crime is a frequent occurrence. How likely is it that will happen? 10%? 20%? 50%? That is, of every 100 people who walk on this street, how many of them will be attacked? 10? 20? 50? Of course, 10% chance of getting attacked is still way too high. Anything above 0% requires you to take some precaution, so it

does seem reasonable to think that you should be careful and on alert. Now, if there is a 100 % chance of an attack—if you see the attacker lunging toward you, for instance—then of course we need to worry the hell out of ourselves. That hardly ever being the case at any given moment, however, your worry and caution should be proportional to the danger. What is the reasonable precaution you need to take when there is a 20% chance of attack? 20%, of course! Anything above that is the toad.

> When my older child was an infant, he took these naps in the afternoon that lasted five or six hours. Heavenly for me, of course. I got a lot done those days. However, after about three hours or so, I would start to get anxious. Is the baby dead? Should I go check up on him? Shake him and make sure he is alive? All reasonable thoughts. However, the thing is, if the baby is, indeed, dead, going in to wake him up wasn't really going to do anything to revive him. It was highly unlikely that I would walk in right at the very moment he was gasping for his last breath, when I could rush in and save him, somehow, right in the nick of time. So, chances were, the baby was either already dead, or was just fine. My going in would not have made any difference, except that I would have lost those heavenly few hours in which I could get a lot of things done. My worrying, of course, was even less useful. I had experience on my side; for many days and weeks the baby routinely napped for several hours. There was no reason to believe that the baby was dead, and there being no reason to worry, I eventually stopped worrying. After all, even if the baby was dead, it didn't hurt to spend a couple of more hours in peace before I found that out. I still ask myself "Is the baby dead?" whenever I worry about things about which my worrying or doing anything does not make a bit of a difference, and in fact can make things worse.

You may also have other special toad triggers, like my allergies. Fatigue is a common one. Hunger is another good one; you may feel like the world is about to end or like everyone you know is a jerk when you are famished. Seasonal changes is another; some people's toads get more active when there are more gloomy days, and some people's toads get more active on oppressively hot and sunny days. Some people's toads push people out the door in glee on the first sunny, hot day of the summer without any sunblock, without any water, and without a spare shirt to throw on when it gets cooler later on. Some people's toads insist that they trek on in the snow without a map, without proper equipment, and without a safety plan. Some people's toads insist that it's impossible to resist the temptation of a well-placed railing, just the right height to jump over.

> In high school, I took up orienteering. Occasionally, I came across a patch of yellow flowers right where a short-cut would be useful. My toad invariably hopped in and said, "Oh, it's those flowers again. That's a good short cut. Grab a stick for whacking at the flowers." I waded right in, only to discover that mixed in with the yellow flowers were pricker bushes. I came out the other end all torn up and bloody, my hand sore from swinging a stick at the pricker bushes, which were a lot stiffer than the yellow-flowered plants. Then, further down the path, I would come across another patch of yellow flowers. "Hey!" my toad would say, "It's those short-cut flowers again! Grab a stick!"

Take account of when your toad jumps in, and take control of yourself before the toad does.

Toads also love driving cars! Faster! Faster! Take that lane now or else! You're lost, you idiot! Shit, brake now! Hard! Honk!

Scream! Turn! Go! Stop! Honk again! Ohmigod, that's a police car! Panic! No, keep driving; who needs a potty break? If you get gas first you will be late, like, an hour! Turn out now or you'd be stuck here forever! &^%$ing jerk; let's show them who's the boss!

> Once, I was driving on the highway, and I was so tired, I could cry. I had trouble seeing, and I got into a few close calls. I wished I could tell someone with a sympathetic ear just how tired I was, but there was no one around. So, my toad tells me, "Hey, why don't you run your car into that parked car on the shoulder of the exit ramp? That'll show them just how tired you are. What kind of an idiot parks on the exit ramp, anyway?"

Toads are not very good drivers, of your vehicle or of your life.

Toad Thoughts and Anger

Then there are the "angry" thoughts. Some angry thoughts are "negative" thoughts and some are "exciting" thoughts, and so are easy to recognize as toad thoughts. However, many angry thoughts are neither clearly negative nor clearly exciting. Anger is an interesting emotion; it tells us what is important. We don't get angry about unimportant things. Anger tells us something is going on, and we need to pay attention to it. But, we don't always *need* to be angry to pay attention to it, or do we?

Sometimes we get angry instead of some "real" feeling we are having. We might be feeling sad, disappointed, hurt, frustrated, rejected, wronged, etc. Rather than deal with these feelings, we get angry that we have to feel it. Sometimes we lash out at others, as if we wanted to make our feeling go away by making someone else sad, disappointed, hurt, frustrated, rejected, wronged, etc. At such moments, the trick is to find out what you

are really feeling. The anger in this case tells you that your hidden feeling is very strong and very real.

At other times, we feel other feelings when we are angry. Rather than express and deal with our anger, we might get depressed, anxious, agitated, flustered, confused, etc. Many of us think that anger should not be expressed, so we fight it off by becoming depressed, anxious, agitated, flustered, confused, etc. At such moments, the trick is to realize that you are angry, and that you need some way of recognizing or expressing your anger. The anger in this case is what you need to experience so you can move on.

So, not all angry thoughts are toad thoughts. The trick, then, is to find out how much of your anger is reasonable and how much of it is not.

- Were you wronged? Is something dreadfully unfair or unjust? Did someone hurt your feelings? Did someone betray you? Did someone harm someone you care about? In such cases, anger is a perfectly reasonable reaction.

- Does this kind of thing *always* happens to you? Is the other person is implying that you are worthless? Did you just fly off the handle? In such cases, there might be more to your anger. Some of it may be reasonable, and some of it may be the toad's.

- Are you getting more and more angry the more you think about it? Are you remembering all the other times you were angry, and all the other future times you will be angry, and coming up with all the different ways you can be angry and express your anger and have the world know just how angry you are? In such cases, you may have started out

with reasonable anger, but now you are just doing the toad's work.

Perceptions and Angry Toad Thoughts

One good test of toad thoughts is to insert "It seems like" or "I feel like" in front of your thought, and see if it means exactly the same thing. For instance, instead of thinking, "This kind of thing always happens to me", think to yourself, "It seems like this kind of thing always happens to me." If these two sentences mean the same thing, then what you have is a "perception", or a jump to conclusion; things may *seem* that way, but it may not actually be true, and you know this.

The question, then, is, "What are the facts that you actually observed?" You may remember all the many times something like this has happened. How often does it happen? What is the appropriate reaction to something that happens that often? Is it reasonable to be angry? If so, go for it. If not, perhaps it's the toad insisting that you be hell-bent angry over something that is not a big deal.

You can practice doing this when you are not angry. Next time you are driving, waiting in line at a store, dealing with a government bureaucrat, or talking to your children or your parents—any situation in which your anger may be easily triggered—after each time someone does something or says something, see what thoughts come into your mind about what just happened. What are you telling yourself about the event, and about the motive of the other person?

My (least) favorite anger moment is when someone else honks the horn while I'm driving. Is the other person trying to warn me because I'm doing something unsafe? Is the other person impatient because I'm not moving fast

> enough? Is the other person just saying "hello"? Is the other person just a big, &^%*ing jerk? Should I be grateful? Should I feel guilty? Should I be angry? Should I ignore it? Should I find out what's going on? *What if they kill me first?*

What evidence do you have to support your perception? You may be right, and you may be wrong. How often do you get angry because you think they are trying to get to you, when you have no real evidence that, at this very moment, consciously, deliberately, they are trying to get to you? If you are like me and like most people I know, more often than necessary.

> One time, I saw a car screech to a stop halfway into an intersection and honk at a pedestrian, who had almost reached the other side. "What the *&^%^ does the jerk think he's doing? The ped's got a walk sign", was my first thought, and my blood was about to boil over. Then I saw the pedestrian walk back into the crosswalk, wave at the driver, *smiling*, and pick up something from the road. "Oh", I realized, "the driver was being helpful." *Helpful!* But, my toad was suggesting that I get up and get pissed off at the rudeness of the world that has destroyed all sense of civility and common sense and keeps electing these...

This kind of thing happens a lot more often than you realize. If you get angry a lot, it may be that you have many good reasons to be angry. I certainly do, and I certainly understand, and there are plenty of times when we *deserve* to be angry. However, is the degree to which you are angry really that useful? Wouldn't you rather be a little less tired out by your anger? Wouldn't you rather stop feeding your toad?

Only you can decide how angry you need to and want to be. Don't let the toad decide for you. Anger is useful in understanding what matters to you. Still, it is by no means as necessary as the toad will have you believe, since there are many other ways of understanding what matters to you. You might also be someone who enjoys being angry. That's OK. Just keep in mind that your toad enjoys it a lot more than you do.

A lot of people confuse perceptions with feelings, because strong perceptions usually come with strong feelings. Unlike feelings, which you feel deep in your body, however, perceptions are thoughts. You can tell the difference because you say "I feel *like*..." when you are describing your perception, as opposed to "I am..." that you say to describe your feelings. You cannot control your feelings, but you can control your perceptions. Most importantly, you do not have to believe your perceptions, especially if it is from the toad. Your feelings should be respected and accepted. You cannot argue against your feelings. Your perceptions, however, like any other thought, may very well need to be examined, corrected, adjusted, disputed, and, perhaps, abandoned.

How to Weaken the Toad

The best thing to do when you've got a toad talking is to ignore it. Dismiss the thought. Give it no more attention than it deserves. It's possible that, by chance, the toad has landed on a good idea, so it's OK to at least consider the merits. If it is meritless, however, dismiss it immediately.

That's so much easier said than done, of course. If you have a well-fed toad, it will take a little more effort to ignore the toad. One popular way of ignoring the toad is to concentrate on a different, more useful, more realistic thought. Think about what would be a reasonable assessment of the situation, your

reasonable expectation that something will or will not happen, or is or is not happening. Think about what might be a more useful way of thinking about the situation. Think about what advice you would give to someone else; think about what advice someone you trust may give you. You may need to work out a list of alternative thoughts when your toad is quiet. Practice the alternatives as much as you can, and you will find that those thoughts pop into your head as automatically as the toad thoughts.

One word of caution. Don't argue or reason with the toad, and do not *ever* get angry at the toad. First of all, the toad is not that smart. It will not respond to reason. It will only respond to whether you catch its suggestion or ignore it, and, unfortunately, being angry, for the toad, counts as a catch. Sure, the toad would prefer that you just accept its suggestion. Still, even "bad" attention is attention nevertheless, and the toad will get fed as long as you respond with strong emotions, positive or negative, expected or unexpected. The only way to convince the toad to stop feeding you the suggestion is to ignore it, to make it not worth its time.

> Once, my toad had me thoroughly convinced that the world was crumbling all around me. I felt shitty and worthless; my whole body felt weak and terrified. I started yelling at the toad to "Get out of my head", and started banging my head on a washing machine, hoping to dislodge the toad. All the while, the toad was a bit confused, but soon realized that I was doing all its work, and started to get gleefully relaxed: I was the one convincing myself that I could *never* get rid of the toad unless I hurt my head so bad that I lost consciousness, and in believing so I was feeding the toad very, very well, indeed.

Meditation is another good way of ignoring the toad. One way of meditating is to try not to have any thoughts. Another is to focus on a word, image, or idea; not to think about it, but to hold it in your mind as a focus so as to remove all other thoughts. Prayer is also a form of meditation; contemplate on your relationship to whichever spiritual reality in which you believe.

Another word of caution. Avoid desperate pleas to help you silence your toad, and similarly avoid urgent chanting of prayers or meditative words. If your prayer or meditation increases your urgency, that will also feed the toad. Choose a meditation or prayer that brings you peace and quiet. Avoid meditations or prayers that are overdramatic or emotionally escalate.

There are also relaxation methods that work well. My favorite is abdominal breathing.

> Breath in through the nose for three seconds, hold your breath for three seconds, then breath out through the mouth for three seconds, and hold your breath for three seconds. Place your hand on your belly, and, with each breath, feel the lower belly fill up and empty out. Listen to your breath, and focus on the sound of your breath.

Relaxation methods tend to turn off the limbic system, and therefore actually turns on the "thinking" systems of your brain. Relaxation will, somewhat ironically, bring clarity to your thinking, and help you sort out what is really important and what really needs to be done.

Once the toad has been thwarted, you might want to send a thoughtful feeling to the poor toad that didn't get fed, some kind of a gentle, forgiving pat on the head. Let it know that you do not fear it and you do not reject it. It is a part of you, after all.

Picture yourself comforting the poor thing, letting it know that it is still welcome and accepted, and letting it know that you are going to starve it nonetheless. In a funny way, you are not harming it at all by starving it. You are, rather, training it to do what it is truly supposed to do: be the creative, imaginative, quick-thinking, problem-solving random idea generator that will prove to be helpful once in a while.

What about "positive thinking"? Since many toad thoughts are "negative" thoughts, positive thinking can be helpful in displacing the toad thoughts. However, some toad thoughts are, in fact, "positive" thoughts.

> I was working as an independent computer programmer, and one of my client wanted me to consider doing a project. I realized that I needed a faster computer to get the job done in time. I researched my options, and found a leasing deal that made a lot of sense to me. I got very excited and started making the arrangements to make the purchase. My partner was not so sure, and insisted that this was all going to fall apart. I accused my partner of dwelling on the negatives, crimping my mood, not believing in me, etc., etc. So, my computer arrives, and I spend hours and days, staying up late at night, getting the computer ready to go. When I finally told my client about the computer, the client actually got mad at me; she was hoping that I worked on a slower computer because the program needed to eventually run on slower computers. After that, things went down hill, and I lost that client within a few months. That was my last major programming contract, and it took me years to pay off the computer.

So whether a thought is "positive" or "negative" depends on the context. The question is not whether the thought is positive or

negative as such, but whether it is reasonable. Reasonable thoughts are neither entirely positive nor entirely negative. Reasonable thoughts are usually a mixture of both. “Positive thinking” by itself may not always be that helpful, in other words, and in manic states they can be very unhelpful, indeed.

What about “distractions”? Distractions work well to turn your attention away from a toad thought. However, distractions can also land you back on to another toad thought, just as “positive” thinking can. If you find yourself urgently focusing on a positive thought or a distraction, where the “alternative” to the toad thought is becoming more and more urgent and escalating, if you start to be depressed that you just don’t seem to be able to do what it takes to get rid of the toad, if you start feeling like you have to keep doing this over and over and over and over just to keep yourself sane...

It’s time to stop. Don’t do the toad’s work.

What the Toad Is Not

The inner child

Sometimes the toad reminds you of something you had forgotten. Something that happened in your childhood. A long-standing grudge. A hurtful comment from a (former) friend. The damage your parents did to you. The teacher who didn't understand you. Etc. Etc. Perhaps you hadn't forgotten at all; it's just too painful to remember every hour of the day. It may seem that, in reminding you of your past, the toad is trying to speak for your "inner child", the person you were, the person you would have been had those terrible things not happened, the person you were and still are despite it all.

It may well be that your inner child wants to speak to you. However, the toad can also sound like your inner child. If the

toad knows that you will catch the inner child's voice, it will try to sound like the inner child. In fact, it's more likely that the toad is really talking at random, and happen to say something that hit you hard because you realize it is something deeply, profoundly important to you. That is, you feel compelled to believe the toad because it sounds real and important, somehow fundamental to your very being, your origins, the basis of your life.

Nevertheless, keep in mind that you have an "inner adult" as well, the person you have become, the person who grew out of the child you once were. This adult has many more resources and skills for dealing with the hurts, the thwarted dreams, the dashed hopes. We were once vulnerable, and we are not any more. The inner adult can more than likely take good care of the inner child's needs in a loving, competent way, and that's more than likely what the inner child would want. By contrast, the voice that wants you to get depressed, angry, agitated, anxious, or panicked because of something that happened to you long ago, more than likely, is the toad.

The subconscious

Similarly, what the toad tells you may resonate with you because of your subconscious beliefs and desires. It may be worth exploring what your subconscious needs are such that the toad can take hold of you with a certain thought. However, that does not mean that the toad speaks for your subconscious. It's just that the toad discovered by accident what resonates with your subconscious, and decided to use it again and again.

An evil

Also, it may seem that at times the toad is trying to control you or ruin your life. Why else would there be a voice in your head —literally or figuratively—that makes you act in a way you know you wouldn't and don't want to? Thinking of the toad as an

evil presence can make you feel scared, hopeless, or angry, which, of course, feeds the toad. Instead, think of the toad as a pitiful, unintelligent creature whose only goal is to get fed. It doesn't even understand what it is trying to get you to do. It just knows how to repeat the things that work.

> Some of my clients like to think of their toads as an unsavory, disgusting creature. Some of them like real toads, and so thinks of some other creature they don't like. This does seem to work well, especially if the creature is so gross that you can't even imagine catching a thought from something like that. At the same time, this isn't really necessary; I like toads, too, and a lot of other creatures other people find totally repellent. I just think of my toad as I think about snails; creatures that I like, in principle, but has caused me no end of trouble and so I choose to destroy without mercy. Creatures that are just doing what they do to survive, like flies and liver flukes and aphids and scales. Oddly, I feel fond of my toad at times, and feel bad about starving it at times. Of course, that doesn't mean I'll indulge it one little bit at my expense.

Your mother or father or ex or sibling or whoever the toad sounds like

There are bound to be people in your life whose opinions matter a lot to you, even though you totally disagree with their opinions, and even if their opinions are needlessly hurtful or annoying. The more those people get to you, the more easily the toad learns to sound like them, and repeat those hurtful or annoying things to you every chance it gets. However, the toad is not trying to speak for those people, or trying to convince you that they are right. The toad is not smart enough to know what those things mean and why they are hurtful or annoying; it only knows that you will catch the thought and feel hurt or annoyed.

Another trick the toad uses is to jump in whenever you are talking to one of those people in person, by phone, on e-mail, etc. The moment they say something hurtful or annoying, the toad jumps in to say, "Oh, you know they're right", or "Man, that pisses you off no end", or whatever it takes to provoke an extreme response from you. The toad may even dare to say, "Ha, you think you are over these people, and the moment they say one thing you just crumble like a shortbread bunny." Keep in mind that, without the toad's "help", you are perfectly capable of ignoring those people, just as you are perfectly capable of ignoring the toad.

Are All Toad Thoughts Bad Thoughts?
No. Toad thoughts are neither good nor bad. They are just a thought that has gone out of control. It is the “out of control” part that is unhelpful, not the content of the thought itself.

> While talking to a client, I suddenly come up with a question, as one would in any conversation. Some questions, however, seem more impulsive and pointless than others, rather than carefully thought out, as counseling questions are supposed to be. Still, as quickly as I can, I evaluate the impulsive question against what I know about what works in counseling, what I learned in training, and what I learned through experience. If I can conclude that the question would be useful at that point in the session, I go ahead and ask the question. If not, and I *still* feel the urge to do it, then I know it’s the toad talking.

Because the toad is intricately connected to the creative parts of my brain, it is hard to tell what is a creative, innovative idea and what is just a bad habit of doing useless things. The question of whether a thought is a toad thought is therefore not in the merit

of the thought, but the degree to which you feel compelled to catch it even though you know it is not terribly useful or true.

Some of my clients have come up with the idea of a "good toad". Some "good toads" seem to chase the "bad toad" away, like the metaphor of the angel and the devil on one's shoulders. Some "good toads" give helpful reminders, advice, solutions, etc.

> As I drive away from home or work, I often cannot remember if I actually locked the doors. The thought that I should go back and check often pops into my head. Depending on the situation, I ignore the thought or go back and check. Doing this once or twice is reasonable, because you do need to be sure to keep things safe. That is a "good toad" thought. Doing it over and over again, which I occasionally do, is obviously counterproductive. That is a "bad toad" thought.

So, again, of course the toad thought can have some grain of usefulness in it. When it becomes problematic is when your toad thought goes beyond reasonable usefulness. Compare the previous example to this:

> When I was a child, I fell a lot while walking. I somehow landed on the idea that I should step on cracks only with my left foot. This meant that I needed to keep my eye on the street at all times, and I hardly ever fell again. Once I hit adolescence, I became a lot more coordinated, and I could walk without watching my feet so much, but I kept the left-foot-on-crack rule well into adulthood. Once I started working, this became an incredible inconvenience, so I somehow let it go. I had a sense that something horrible would happen if I stopped following the rule, but

> as far as I can tell nothing has happened as a consequence, and I still don't fall over while walking.

In this case, what is a classic example of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder actually served a useful purpose: to keep me from falling. The question is whether the obsession went away when the benefit wasn't there any more. It took a bit too long, but it did eventually. The key is that somehow, some time, I decided that the toad was not helping me with this any more.

Some Relatives of the Toad

The cow

The cow will chew on something that happened over and over and over and over. It doesn't need to be fed much to keep it going. You give the cow an idea, and it will think about it again and again without end. The reasonable question to ask yourself when you've got a cow chewing away is "To what extent will thinking about this actually help?"

> At bed time, I often go over in my mind something that happened in a session with a client. As a counselor, I need to do this, since not everything I do in sessions turns out well, and I need to understand what happened. So, to the extent that a counselor always needs to be self-aware and willing to change and grow, I do need to ruminate a bit. However, replaying what happened over and over is not so helpful. What I really need to do is come up with different things I could have said, or a better way to know when to say what. So I thank the cow for coming up with the topic, run it through a quick analysis, and go to bed.

The chipmunk

The chipmunk is like political pundits. The chipmunk keeps talking and talking, and keeps coming up with new topics, new

ways of thinking about an idea, something that happened long ago that reminds you of something else that happened, and so on, eventually coming back to the first topic, and starting the circle all over again. As with the cow, the reasonable question to ask yourself about a chipmunk is "To what extent will thinking about this actually help?"

> Occasionally, I wake up in the night, and without even realizing that I am awake, I'm writing a counseling handout, which reminds me of some official letter I need to respond to, which reminds me of the scheduling conflict, which means that I have to rehearse what I'm going to say to my clients about the scheduling problem, which reminds me about the errands I need to do, which reminds me of all the things on my to-do list, which includes the counseling handout... I do need to write the counseling handout some time in the next, say, year or so. More precisely, I *want* to, some day. All the other things are already on my to-do list, except for the letter. So, I get up and write that down on the to-do list, and go back to sleep.

Of all the toad's relatives, the chipmunk is one of the most difficult to deal with. Do not attempt to engage, reason, or argue with chipmunks; it only encourages them, like on-line bloggers and radio talk-show hosts. The best way to deal with them is to tune them out; if you stop listening, they will stop bothering to talk.

The owl

G.W.F. Hegel, a German Philosopher, once wrote, "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings at dusk", by which he meant something like "Judgments about historical events can only take place when it's in the past", or, more directly, "Hind sight is 20/20". The owl is like the cow except that it has a habit of

working only at night, and it is *very* judgmental, usually about some mistake your made. So, the reasonable question is "In what way is what I did a mistake, and what do I need to think about so I don't make the same mistake again?"

> In 1994, I was at a meeting. I had parked at a meter, and I knew there wasn't much time left. As I was leaving, I ran into someone whom I found rather attractive. We started chatting, and after a while I found out that that person was going on a year-long trip overseas. Disappointed, I came back to my car to find a parking ticket on the windshield. I never saw that person again. I think about this once or twice a year, and, every time I do, I find myself banging my head against something going, "stupid, stupid, stupid." Well, it turned out that it was not a worthwhile effort, but who's to say that it could never have ended up in a fabulous relationship or a life-long friendship? It really was not a mistake; I took a calculated risk, and it cost me some. No big deal. Still, next time, I will probably make sure I come back to the meter, no matter how attractive or interesting someone is. Besides, it was in 1994! Let it go!

The packrat

The packrat isn't content to worry about your problems. It will worry about *everybody's* problems. Some of these problems may be of reasonable concern to you, such as how your parents or siblings or someone you love is going to solve a problem they are facing. Your best friend who has gotten into one of *those* relationships again. Your neighbor whose dog is sick. Your coworker who is about to get fired. The reasonable question here is "Is this something you can actually help by worrying about it?" If your answer is, "Well, I wish there were something I could do", then it definitely is *not* something that worrying will help solve. If your answer is, "Well, there is something I could

do, but I really can't do it", it's still not something worrying will help solve. In fact, generally speaking, worrying does not help. Problem-solving may help, and it should not be confused with worrying.

> My father worries about my sister a lot, and I used to worry about my father worrying so much. It seems to be eating away at him. I often wonder if there is something I can do to help my sister, so my father doesn't have to worry so much, and have tried a few things. Most of the things I tried didn't help at all. Eventually, my sister got herself to a point where I don't worry about her much, but my father still worries. Not much I can do there any more. I still think about whether there is anything I can do, but it seems pretty clear that it's between my father and my sister, or perhaps just between my father and himself.

The katydid

The katydid lingers in the back of the mind, chirping away, again and again reminding you that there is something you need to deal with. If you try to comply and find out what it's chirping about, it goes silent. You give up and let it go eventually, at which point it starts chirping again. It's possible that you did forget something important, so there is a reasonable degree of concern here. However, you are, in essence, worried that you are not worried enough. It sounds silly when you put it like that, but that's exactly what the katydid is all about. Ironically, the more you have to actually worry about, the more active the katydid becomes; instead of being able to focus on each problem, you are enveloped in a cloud of vague, undefinable, apparently forgotten worries. Before you know it, you are so worried about things you are not worrying about that you don't have any energy left to deal with things that you do need to think about. Panic attacks often occur when you are not really worrying

about anything, sometimes even when you are actually taking a breather from a busy day. It's the katydid; it's so accustomed to remind you of something you need to take care of that it reminds you as loudly as it can that there must be something, anything, right now.

> When I was a student, at the end of each term, I'd work and work to finish all the assignments. When the term was done, rather than enjoying the break, I became more agitated and anxious. It was almost a relief to remember something I forgot to do, but even after I've absolutely double-checked everything, I was still not relaxed. Usually, the anxiety let up when school started up again, but it was hard to focus on new assignments while feeling like I forgot to do something last term, especially if I had a tight feeling in my chest and tension in my neck. The solution was to have a day when I did absolutely nothing productive. No worrying. No doing. Just resting, curled up on a couch with a jar of pickles (Yes, that's my comfort food) and watching old Kids in the Hall routines. By the end of the day, I had a freshly written to-do list, and I was ready to face the problems.

This is the power of vacationing; the only solution to having too much to worry about is to get away from it all. Seriously. When the katydid is loud and powerful, you won't get much done anyway, so you might as well take off. Once your limbic system calms down, you can focus better on things you want to focus on.

The kitten

Kittens love to play. They lie resting quietly for hours and hours, then suddenly jump up and attack a certain nothingness in the air. They hide behind a chair, and when someone walks by, bolt

out as if the world is about to end. They chase their own tails, for a good measure, not to mention a host of other untenable targets. Baby mammals play because it helps them learn the skills they need in real life. Some mammals, like humans, never stop playing, and come up with more and more elaborate ways of practicing real life scenarios in a simulated setting. In other words, playing is hardly meaningless and useless; it's about readiness.

Some of us, however, are always ready for the worst. It's one thing to be ready to respond to any situation. It's quite another to go into full-on, emergency, panicked, red-alert whenever a difficult situation arises. The question to ask with the kitten is, "How much readiness is enough to keep me prepared?"

> Whenever my father calls, I'm glad to talk to him, but there was a time when a part of me always went into a "crouching tiger" pose. Because I knew The Question was coming. "*Do you have a job, yet*?" Until The Question came, I rehearsed in my mind what I was going to say. Oddly enough, The Question didn't always come—only about once in three phone calls. When it did come, of course, my heart would sink, and I'd pounce by tersely muttering whatever explanation I was rehearsing. I would clench my teeth as if I am being dragged bare-naked into a murky pool full of sea urchins and eels. I would get angry, dejected, and embarrassed. My dad would usually reply with a brief expression of concern; he never said anything hurtful or disturbing, and the conversation usually ended soon. Eventually, I realized that he repeated the same expression of concern regardless of what explanation I gave. Even when I did have jobs, he found some other way of being worried. So, really, there was no need for me to be prepared at all, since the degree of my preparedness didn't

make a difference in the consequences. Once I got to a point were my only response to The Question could be a casual “nope”, my kitten became accustomed to enjoying a cozy, sweet catnap whenever my father called.

A Note to Other Counselors

I am a Person-Centered, Integrative counselor. As a Person-Centered counselor, I believe that my job as a counselor is to understand my client’s experience without judgment and communicate my understanding to my client, and that healing and change come from this process of understanding. As an Integrative counselor, I also believe that there is no one right way of counseling that works for every client; I believe it is my job to find out what techniques of counseling would work best for a client, given what I understand about the client.

The toad is a combination of a Cognitive Therapy thought-stopping technique and a Narrative Therapy externalization technique. I have found that many clients do not take well to the traditional cognitive therapy techniques, because they have trouble identifying their “hot thoughts” or because they get mired in a self-admonishments about their inability to get rid of “bad thoughts”. Some client are inquisitive, and do not want to just dismiss what appear to them to be some deep, dark truths.

In my own experience as a person with seasonal depression and hypomania, I felt that externalizing the “hot thoughts” as something that does not come from within, and is basically random and meaningless, is actually more helpful than systematically arguing against it. The toad is a mnemonic that lends itself easily to externalization, because rarely does a person identify with a “toad within” or an “inner toad”.

The emphasis on “reasonable response” comes from the Reality Therapy model of WDEP: what do you want, what do you usually do to get it, evaluate its effectiveness, then make a plan that you believe will get you what you want. It always surprises me how often people, including myself, act without a goal in mind.

I have found that the toad is often useful as a “try this first” tool for most clients who have a cognitive, behavioral, or physical understanding of mental health. Clients who are taking medications and those with seasonal affect concerns especially welcome it, since they already see their symptoms as largely physical and beyond their (cognitive) control. Insight- and affect-oriented clients tend to be somewhat skeptical at first, but can be persuaded to try it and do find it useful at least as a “stop gap” until “real work” or “deep work” is done. It appears to be especially useful for clients who are anxious about their anxiety, depression, mania, or psychosis, as a way of normalizing their symptoms (“Everyone has a toad; you just have an especially strong and creative one.”) and to peel away the superimposed layer of anxiety without resorting to false hope (“The toad can not be eliminated, but it can be weakened.”).

Some clients are, of course, averse to any kind of externalization.

Clients who are reactive may need extra psychoeducation with how to distinguish between sense, perception, thought, and feeling, as proposed in Jungian Psychoanalysis. Some clients, especially those who are impulsive, may need repeated, directive, and iterative questions about what they want out of a situation and to what extent the toad thought is actually helpful.

I have not tried the toad with clients with uncontrolled psychoses. I assume talking about a “creature living in your head” is not helpful in all cases.