

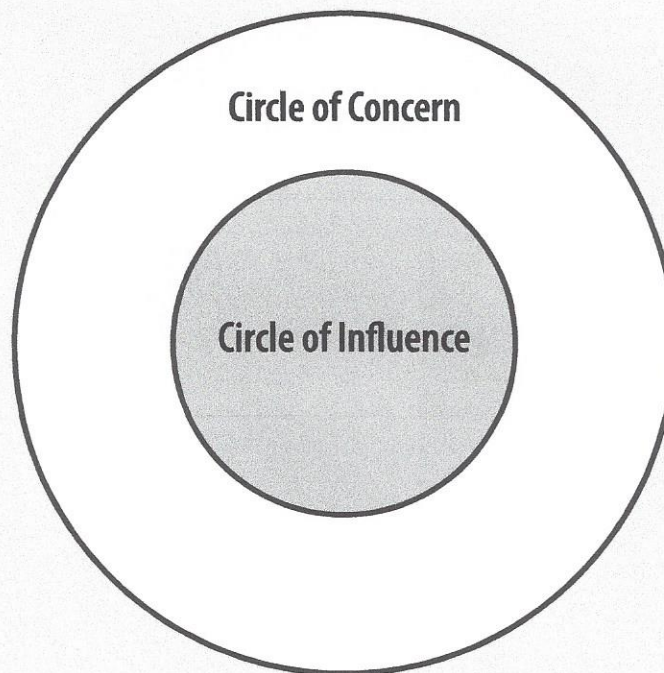
## **HANDOUT 12-B**

### **THE CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE VS. THE CIRCLE OF CONCERN**

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Often we are paralyzed by worry because we are focusing on things we cannot control and not attending to things we can control. Much of our emotional well-being depends on our being able to clearly see the difference between what we can and cannot control. A powerful way to visualize this was described by the late Dr. Stephen Covey in his classic book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Imagine two concentric circles. Dr. Covey referred to the inner circle as the Circle of Influence. This consists of those things in life that we can change by our own will. In general, this consists of our own behavior, our attitude, and not much else. The outer circle is called the Circle of Concern and consists of all the many things that affect us but over which we have no control. This includes the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of other people. It also includes external factors like the weather or state of the economy. Finally, it includes the past because it cannot be changed. However, we can change how we think about and deal with past events in the here and now.



It is a basic principle in life that we are more effective (and worry less) when we focus on the Circle of Influence. When we do that, we become empowered and the Circle of Influence grows. That is, we end up having more influence over a situation than we previously had. We are less effective (and worry more) when we focus on the outer circle. When we do this, we become disempowered and our Circle of Influence shrinks.

Here is an example. I am working with an unemployed client who tells me "I can't get a job because I'm 55 years old. They're just not hiring people my age in this recession." I cannot deny that these factors might impact his ability to find work. But look where his focus is. He cannot change his age or the economy, so they clearly are in



the outer Circle of Concern. So if these two factors are the center of his thinking, what will his job search be like? There is a good chance that he will be defeated before he even starts.

Now let's imagine that this unemployed gentleman decided to focus on the inner Circle of Influence. Likely his thinking would be, "What do I need to do to find work? Should I consult with a vocational counselor or job coach? Do I need to get some more training? Maybe I should do some power networking by telling my friends to tell their friends. Maybe I should contact a few recruiters or post my resume on as many job search websites as possible. Maybe I should set a goal of directly contacting ten potential employers every day." Clearly, his job search is more likely to be successful.

It is very easy to drift out into the Circle of Concern; in fact, it can be quite comfortable. However, we don't get very far when we do this.

I worked with a client who was constantly frustrated with the management and co-workers at her place of employment. She would say things like "That guy comes in late all the time and he never gets into trouble. That woman leaves early and she never gets into trouble. But if I take a little extra time for lunch, I get called on the carpet. Besides, my co-workers are lazy and are gossiping all the time."

Her complaints were legitimate, but it is easy to see that they all fall within the Circle on Concern. She cannot control what her co-workers do or how her manager deals with them. As long as she thinks this way, she will feel like a victim and have a negative attitude about her work. It might even negatively impact her work performance.

I asked her to think about what might be in her Circle of Influence. Can she control when she arrives to work, when she leaves, and how long she takes for lunch? Can she do her job to the best of her ability? Can she have a positive attitude on the job and treat her co-workers with respect? If she has some concerns to voice to her manager, can she express her feelings in a positive way?

If you ever attended 12-Step meetings such as AA and Al-Anon, they will often recite the following prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things that I can; and the wisdom to know the difference." This powerful prayer perfectly illustrates the Circles of Influence and Concern.



## HANDOUT 12-C

### DALE CARNEGIE'S THREE-STEP PROCESS FOR WORRY

Many people are familiar with the classic self-help book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie. But you might not know that Mr. Carnegie wrote another book called *How to Stop Worry and Start Living*. Mr. Carnegie was not a mental health professional but his book contains a lot of folksy wisdom. One of the best techniques from his book is his simple three-step process for handling worry. The three steps are as follows:

1. Imagine the worst possible outcome to your current concern. Many are reluctant to do this because it upsets them too much. "I don't want to think about it; it scares me too much." The problem is that they are already thinking about it; that's why they're worried. So let's go ahead and get it out on the table.
2. Emotionally accept that the worst-case scenario might actually happen. You are not resigning yourself to it, but you can at least consider the possibility that it will happen. To help you with this acceptance, you can ask yourself these three questions: (1) What will be the real consequences if the bad thing happens? (2) How will I cope with those consequences?(3) What will still be good in my life?
3. Now that you have accepted the worst-case scenario, do what you reasonably can to prevent it. Take practical steps to get a better outcome.

I learned this model as an undergraduate student. One term I was way behind in my work and I was very anxious about my grades. So, I decided to try this model.

**First step:** I actually calculated my worst possible grade point average. It was pretty bad!

**Second step:** I worked to accept the worst case by asking myself the three questions. What would be the real consequences? It would likely mean academic probation and upset parents. How would I cope with those consequences? I had done well before, so I would just need to return to my former good study habits. As far as my parents were concerned, I would beg their forgiveness. What would still be good in my life? Actually, there was a lot that would be good. I still had college for now. My parents would not disown me. I would still have my friends, my health, and many other good things.

**Third step:** Once I used steps one and two to calm down a bit, I got to work. As is often the case with things we worry about, my grades were much better than I feared.



## HANDOUT 12-D

### THE DVD MODEL FOR INTRUSIVE WORRY

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Sometimes there are issues that are so troubling that we almost cannot think of anything else. It is like the ANTS have taken over and we feel powerless to do anything about them. If you are struggling with this kind of intrusive, obsessive worry, here are some techniques that might give you some relief.

These techniques are all based on the model of a DVD player. Imagine that a DVD disk corresponds to the entire contents of your mind—all your memories, imagination, language, everything. The TV screen or monitor corresponds to what happens to be in your conscious awareness at any point in time. Obviously, the disk contains a lot more than the screen, and the content of the screen is constantly changing.

When some thought or image comes up on the screen that distresses us, our natural tendency is to resist it. We might even say to ourselves, “Stop thinking about that.” Unfortunately, we now understand that ANTS are automatic and trying “not” to think them usually backfires. In fact, trying “not” to think something is like pushing the pause button on your DVD. The distressing thought or image just stays there on the screen.

However, using this analogy of a DVD player, there are four other strategies that you can try. Many people find one or more of these helpful in reducing the intensity of the worry.

**Change the channel:** If what comes up on the screen is too distressing, one thing you can do is pick up the remote control and simply change the channel. In other words, you can create a menu of thoughts, images, and memories that you can switch to whenever you feel the need. It could be a pleasant memory or an image of a place where you feel safe and comfortable. It might be a favorite prayer, scriptural verse, poem, affirmation, or inspirational saying. It might involve thinking of someone who is very dear to you. It's not that you're resisting the negative thought. You are just choosing to give yourself a break and focus on something more positive.

**Fast forward and rewind:** Rather than resisting the unpleasant thought or image, go ahead and think it on purpose. But run through it quickly. Allow your mind to go all the way to the worst-case scenario. Then back up and run it again. I once worked with a man who was afraid of losing his job, his home, and his marriage. I encouraged him to let his mind quickly visualize all the disasters and then go back and visualize them again. He did this over and over until eventually he became bored with it.

**Record for future viewing:** Another tactic is to designate a specific place and time when you will decide to purposely think about the worrisome situation. If you find yourself worrying about it at some other time, just say to yourself, “This isn't the time for this. I'll think about this tonight at 7:30.” Then immediately replace the worry with something pleasant, productive, or both.

**Comedy channel:** This is a good technique when the negative thought is self-critical or threatening. What you can do is imagine that these negative thoughts are being spoken to you by someone for whom you have no regard or respect at all. It might be a real person or a fictional person such as Homer Simpson or Archie Bunker. One client with severe OCD imagined that his obsessions were being spoken by Donald Duck. Or perhaps you would like to give your negative thoughts a name such as “Mr. Negative,” “The Critic,” or “Party Pooper.”