

The Work (inquiry)

[Quick intro](#)

[My own experience with The Work](#)

[Getting started](#)

[Preparation](#)

[Do The Work](#)

[Other ways to do The Work](#)

Note: This piece is written by Gary Niemen - it is part description and part sharing. I wrote it quite quickly and spontaneously mainly because I am passionate about The Work. It has helped me so much over the years and I think it could be of great use and help to others. It is my take on Byron Katie's The Work. And my take on how somebody could get started using it. So everything here is my writing, my opinion, my experience, and so on. That was a disclaimer, not a boast.

Quick intro

The Work (or inquiry) is four questions and a turnaround. It is developed by a woman called Byron Katie Mitchell (known as Katie). It is a way to question your stressful thoughts. What are stressful thoughts? These are thoughts that you have that lead to you feeling constricted, unhappy, frustrated, anxious, or stressed - in other words thoughts that lead to suffering.

Katie says: "I discovered that when I believed my thoughts, I suffered, but that when I didn't believe them, I didn't suffer, and that this is true for every human being. Freedom is as simple as that. I found that suffering is optional. I found a joy within me that has never disappeared, not for a single moment. That joy is in everyone, always."

In a nutshell, what you do is this:

- Identify your stressful thoughts by capturing them on paper/computer
- Question the thoughts using the four questions
- Turn the initial thoughts around and find three examples of how the new statement is true

The four questions are:

- Is it true?
- Can you absolutely know that it is true?
- How do you react when you believe this thought?
- Who would you be without that thought?

The turnaround is a new formulation of the original thought. You start by turning around to the opposite of the original thought. For example, if the original thought

was "he should not smoke", the turnaround would be "he should smoke". You then find three examples of how the new statement is true. You might then play with further turnarounds, for example, turn around to yourself, "I should not smoke". And then, again, find three examples for this statement.

Going through this process on one or more thoughts often leads to greater awareness, more clarity, more openness, and new insights - and often peace of mind. And then you are in a better space to decide what action to take - in some cases you might decide not to act at all.

For example, consider the thought: "He lied to me". You might be carrying this around for weeks. Going into it. Believing it. Getting more and more annoyed with the person who you think lied to you. And becoming more and more agitated and stressed and angry. And then you do The Work and discover that you don't really know if it is true - that this person lied to you. And you go through the questions and you start to have more awareness around the issue and even get some interesting insights. After doing The Work you feel more relaxed and open and you realize that what you need to do is go and talk to the person. So you do that and you feel calm as you do it. And as it turns out, the whole thing was in fact a misunderstanding. And, actually, this person had been going round wondering why you had suddenly become so distant and cold. This is just a simple example with a happy ending. And, of course, it isn't always this simple.

The traditional way to do The Work is to fill out a so-called Judge-Your-Neighbour worksheet and use that as the basis for questioning. It is a very good and thorough way to do The Work. There are also a number of variations, for example, just doing The Work on one stressful thought that is troubling you. Or, questioning some of your deeper limiting beliefs. Over the years, I have developed some other methods such as writing freely for 20 minutes or so and seeing where you land and then picking some thought to question. Or, speaking freely with somebody - really going into the issue - and then after a while picking some thought to question. In a way, it doesn't matter where you start. It is just to get into the habit of questioning your thoughts. The alternative is to believe all of your thoughts - and this, in my experience, pretty much always leads to suffering.

Here are some examples of stressful thoughts from my life at the moment:

- He is not grateful
- I am wasting my time
- He should stop smoking
- It is going to be difficult
- I am not good enough
- The human race has just 20 years left

Here is me doing The Work on the thought "It is going to be difficult".

Thought/belief: It is going to be difficult.

Q1: Is it true?

Yes

Q2: Can you absolutely know that it is going to be difficult?

No, I can't know that.

Q3: How do you react when you believe the thought (It is going to be difficult)?

I start getting stressed. I start thinking about other times when a similar thing has been difficult. I start speaking to people about how it is going to be difficult. I start feeling nervous. I start feeling physically strange, for example, in my stomach. I start wanting it to be over. I start imagining that it is over. And start fantasising about how I will feel afterwards. How good I will feel when it is over. I think about cancelling it. I think about how I can get out of it. And then I have an argument in my head about how I shouldn't cancel and that I am not the type of person who cancels. I start thinking that I am weak. I start criticising myself. I feel small and inferior. I start dreading it and feel generally unhappy and closed down. I start thinking that I can't function until it is over. I just want it to be over. I feel stuck and trapped. Because I know that I shouldn't cancel. I just feel horrible.

Q4: Who would you be without the thought (It is going to be difficult)?

Well I feel a lot freer. More open. Calmer. I start seeing that there are options. Not just cancelling or not cancelling. Perhaps there are things I can do to make it easier. I feel less nervous. More in control. Start feeling more confident and empowered.

Turnaround 1: It is *not* going to be difficult - can you find three examples.

- 1- I have done something similar and it went okay
- 2- One never knows how things work out
- 3 - It might even get cancelled by R

Turnaround 2: I am going to be difficult.

- 1 - Yes there is some truth there actually, I have an agenda and I want to get that through and that makes me a bit difficult
- 2 - Yes if I carry on believing the thought that it is going to be difficult
- 3 - Perhaps it is just habitual thinking, conditioned thinking

Turnaround 3: He is going to be difficult.

- 1 - Could be, but I don't know that
- 2 - I do fear that, good to be aware of that
- 3 - I'm scared of conflict

So that's what a quick process looks like - just on one thought. Note that the concept is quite broad. I didn't need to use names or even be specific about the situation. Perhaps you thought initially that I was talking about a presentation or something, but actually it was about a one-to-one meeting with somebody. Notice also how awareness is increased. I became aware that I am a bit scared of the person I am going to be meeting and a bit scared of conflict. Also that I have some kind of fixed position that is likely to lead to such a conflict. Just becoming more aware softens my stance. I feel much more creative now and more equipped to deal with the situation - or even to come up with an alternative solution.

Some general points about The Work:

- When doing The Work, the most thorough and best approach is to fill in a Judge-Your-Neighbour worksheet based on your thoughts and feelings in a particular situation.
- The Work is a meditation, not mental gymnastics. It works best when you engage the feelings/emotions.
- The Work is experiential, not theoretical. Katie always says: "Don't take my word, try it for yourself. It's not about my truth, it's about yours."
- The Work is a radical shift in approach to life - instead of reacting to situations based on your existing beliefs, you choose to inquire into your inner world of thought first.
- It can be done on your own, but it is best in the beginning with a friend/partner.
- The turnarounds are often the trickiest bit for people to grasp, but are very important - they kind of deliver you back to reality.
- Thoughts, stories, statements, beliefs, concepts - these are all the same really, these are what we question using The Work.
- The Work is not therapy - but in my opinion, in many cases, can be a great and cheaper alternative.

My own experience with The Work

All suffering is a tantrum. If you really go in and look at your stuff and write it down and question it, you will experience this for yourself. It turns out - in the end - that all suffering is a tantrum. The world is like this and you want it to be like that. Byron Katie's first book is called Loving What Is. This is the place that you get to when you really go in and question your stressful thoughts. Doing The Work leads you to this - Loving What Is. So Loving What Is is not a Pollyanna New Agey position of saying oh look at the world, I love everything - all is great and wonderful. This would be fake. This would be pretending. But if you go in and use The Work to question your stressful thoughts, this is where you arrive. Suddenly, all is okay with you. Because this is the way the world is at the moment. If you argue with that, you are kind of insane. Byron Katie says: "If you argue with the world, you lose. But only 100% of the time." It is like we live in the fake world of our mind, and we believe that rather than what is actually happening. And because of that we suffer. It's not that the world is perfect as it is. But it is as it is. And it is more sane to come from that place. Doing The Work delivers you there. And it is a place of peace. Everything else is a story of how we want the world to be.

So, I came across The Work about 15 years ago. I think I saw the book Loving What Is somewhere and bought it. At the time, I was quite depressed and had many conflictual relationships in my life. I think I had the intuition that the conflictual relationships and the depression were connected and that what was inside this book Loving What Is was a way out of the mess. As soon as I read the book, I knew this tool - called by this weird name The Work and developed by a woman with the strange name of Byron Katie - was for me. It just resonated in some way.

So I read the book and started trying to do The Work. In those days, there wasn't much help around. Not many had heard of it yet. There was a mailing list and you could get hold of tapes of Byron Katie doing The Work. I managed to get hold of them

all and started listening to them. Actually, many times over. Soon some CDs came with more recordings and later some videos. I started coming across a few people in Stockholm who had also discovered The Work and started having private sessions with somebody who seemed to be further along than me. I did this for about a year and a half.

And then as a present to myself on my 40th birthday I signed up for Byron Katie's 9 day School of The Work. This is a 9 day retreat - for me, I went to the one in Germany - where you go and as she says spend 9 days unlearning your current belief system. It is like no other school on earth. It was life changing for me - and I came back even more enthusiastic about The Work. For me, I could see, it was the way out of my limiting thoughts, my suffering, my depression. And, I realised, doing The Work was actually better than therapy - and much much cheaper. I remember sitting at the kitchen table in my flat in Stockholm and doing The Work on what seemed like insurmountable problems. I would think: there is no way out of this, there is no solution. But I would just sit there and do The Work - patiently questioning every statement on my worksheet until I was done. It took courage. It took persistence. It can be tough, you have to sit through the difficult emotions. You have to be truthful to yourself. You have to give up being right. You have to ask yourself, do I want to be right or do I want to be free. No running away. But if you do it, eventually bingo - you kind of land in a place of peace. Einstein said: We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them. Doing The Work is a bit like this. Before you do it, you are kind of stuck and you can't really see a solution. It is like you are in prison - a prison of your own making. But doing The Work, you move to another level. And all of a sudden - you see things differently. You are suddenly out of prison. You are free. Okay, at least for this time. Stuff comes back. You make new walls and create new prisons - but then you just do The Work again.

For a couple of years after going to The School, I would wake up early - often around 5:00 - and question at least one thought. Anything that was bothering me.

Sometimes I didn't think I had anything to question, but if I sat there long enough I would come up with something. Byron Katie says: "If you have The Work for breakfast, for the rest of the day, it will have you." And I found this to be true. If I questioned my thoughts in the morning, for the rest of the day I felt happier and freer. I was much less likely to react on stuff during the day. After years of meditating and not really getting very far, finally I had found a tool that worked for me. A tool that helped me work directly with my suffering - and lift me out of it.

When I was about five years old, my father left. I loved him very much and all of a sudden he was gone. It was like my whole small world had collapsed. I was left with my mother who I didn't really get on with. And then later I got a stepfather who was a decent man, but I didn't really connect with him. So when I was doing The Work, I had plenty to work on. I did many worksheets on my mother, many worksheets. It wasn't just me causing the conflictual relationship, but eventually, through my efforts to question my beliefs I shifted my position and this transformed the relationship. So nowadays my mother and I get on pretty well.

I think what happened in the end is that I forgave my mother. The Work is about taking 100% responsibility. In other words, you take 100% responsibility for your stuff and you deal with it. Never mind about the other person. If they did this much

(wide wide arms) and you did this much (two fingers very close together), you take the responsibility for your part. You work with that - get cleared up with your stuff - and you let them deal with their own stuff, if they so choose. So using The Work I forgave my mother of all the things that I thought she had done. And the way it works is that all the things that I thought she had done kind of melted away - so I was left with no big issues and then all that remains is forgiveness and love. That's a big healing. And I did it for my sake. For my peace of mind. If I hold onto anger or resentment, who am I harming. Just me.

Byron Katie talks about three kinds of business: My business, Your business, and God's business. For God, just substitute Reality or Higher Power or something. And, when it comes down to it, it is only My business that I can take care of.

So, for quite a few years, I carried on doing The Work on all sorts of thoughts and concepts. I remember once doing The Work on the very popular expression "I am tired" - everybody says that a lot don't they - and guess what, it turned out to not even be true (for me). What does that mean? What does it mean that it turned out to not be true? Well, we often say things on one level and if we question them, contemplate them, we discover them to not be true. For example, the thought "she doesn't love me". We might go round for years believing that. And one day, perhaps we question it and discover that we can't really know that. When I talk about truth here, I mean your truth, not some absolute truth. Byron Katie talks a lot about truth. She says do The Work out of the love of truth. And that the truth sets you free. Again, your truth - nobody else's.

What I really like about The Work is that you do it for an hour or so and then you can just forget it and get on with the rest of the day. It just works. Suddenly, a thought is just gone. And the only way you know is that you are suddenly behaving differently. It's a re-programming - but not a forced one like positive thinking techniques or Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). I always tell people that it is brain surgery or thought surgery.

So, it's been 15 years now - and I use The Work most days. Whenever I feel uneasy or stressed or anxious or unhappy or low - I know that there is a stressful thought that I am believing that is not true for me. So I find myself some time/space and try to identify the stressful thought. It is tricky sometimes to find it. But, typically, after a while, it comes - and I use the four questions and turnaround to set myself free. And on I go.

Doing The Work takes me from states such as stuck, confused, low in confidence, just want to hide, low/depressed, contracted to states such as open, relaxed, aware, balanced, creative, flowing, free, and energised.

I have come to see that doing The Work is a commitment - a commitment to making going inside the first response to anything that happens. Why? Because I just think it is the most sane way to live. You stay in your business, with what you can control - and you prioritise peace of mind - trusting that what comes from that space is going to be better for you and others.

When doing The Work, a key aspect I would say is your commitment to the truth, your truth. I think that's what has helped me the most. A determination to see beyond the ego's tricks and go for truth - however uncomfortable, however painful,

however inconvenient, however against the norm or what others say. A willingness to go for the truth is the secret sauce I would say.

Getting started

Preparation

1. Read The Little Book in your language - see [here](#)
2. Read Byron Katie's first book Loving What Is (optional, but recommended).
3. Watch this video of [Byron Katie describing The Work](#)
4. Read about Byron Katie. See [here](#)
5. Read and watch videos on how to do The Work - see [here](#)
6. Watch three or four videos of [Byron Katie doing The Work with various people on various topics](#). Choose topics that appeal to you.
7. Join the slack channel #wellbeing-the-work

Do The Work

1. Print out some Judge-Your-Neighbour Worksheets from [here](#).
2. Think of an issue that you want to work with. In the beginning, focus outward rather than on yourself. You might want to do something about a family member, for example mother, father, sister, brother, partner, or child. Or you might work on something related to work or a friend. Try and pick something with an emotional charge.
3. With the issue that you want to work with in mind, fill out a Worksheet. It is just thought, you are just putting your thoughts on paper so that you can question them. What you are doing is ultimately kind. So don't worry that you are being unkind by writing out your innermost thoughts on somebody. I always say, be a like a child. Just let go and write. Try and keep to short, simple statements.
4. Once you are ready with a Worksheet, you need to go through it questioning each statement. In reality, you will probably *not* need to go through every statement. You are typically done well before that. There have been times where I have literally torn a Worksheet up and said this is total rubbish 45 minutes after thinking that the Worksheet expressed the absolute truth.

With a facilitator

The best way to go through the Worksheet is to get somebody to facilitate you. The facilitator can use [this facilitation guide](#) or keep it simple and use the questions on the [back of this yellow card](#). The facilitator should focus on asking the questions - and should not add anything extra like own theories or something. You, the one being facilitated, should focus on answering the questions - and try to avoid going further into your story.

By yourself

If you can't find anybody to facilitate you, it is possible to facilitate yourself. It can be a bit tricky to get the hang of in the beginning. But once you do, it works fine.

Other ways to do The Work

There are some other ways to use The Work - here are some:

1. [One belief at a time](#)
2. [Question some universal beliefs](#)
3. Sit down with a sheet of paper and just write and write - don't stop. Write everything on your mind. Write it all out. Don't censor, don't stop. After a while, you will write a statement that you realise kind of sums up your sadness or anger or frustration. Question this thought using The Work.
4. Sit down with a friend or similar. Ask them to just let you rant. So just rant. Tell your story in full. Get it all out. All your partner does is listen and encourage you. Asking leading questions and such. After about 30 minutes stop. You should be able to pick out some central themes. Try and pick out a thought that you are believing - something that can be questioned. Ask your partner to go through the 4 questions and turnaround with you on that thought.