



## Episode 36: What To Do When Emotions Cloud Your Thinking

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Tell me – what's going on in your life right now? What's exciting? What's challenging? As a coach, equipping people with strategies to move from stuck to solution is one of my specialties. Because I believe that we get to enjoy life.

And we all have pieces of our life that feel challenging at times. Often, these feel challenging because there's so much emotion tied up in it. When we think about this part of our life, it might stir up a lot of anger at someone, or it might generate feelings of worry. Those emotions can make it hard to think clearly. They can get in the way of us seeing a situation from a more objective view, one that would allow us to see different solutions, to problem solve, and to move forward more easily.

When negative emotions get in the way of clear thinking, it can keep you stuck in the same place for longer than you'd like. It can keep you focusing on the negativity – when you really want to focus on coming up with a plan and deciding what to do next.

Today, I'm going to share a strategy that can do just that. This strategy can help break a vicious cycle of worry, frustration, or overwhelm to see a path forward.

This strategy might surprise you, because it has nothing to do with talking.

The strategy is drawing. Believe it or not, one solution to moving forward when we feel upset is to take a pen and paper, and draw out what's happening.

Drawing things out is a brain strategy. It helps us think more expansively because it engages more of our brain than is used simply by talking about a problem.

When we talk about a problem, we're leaning into a way of thinking that uses the left half, or left hemisphere, of our brain more. Many of us are used to processing problems by talking about them, but the downside of that is that if we keep talking about it, we stay stuck in the emotion. There's another way we can solve our problem, and that's by engaging our right brain hemisphere.

The right hemisphere of the brain thinks in terms of images. By drawing something out, we are inviting this half of our brain to join in the problem solving conversation to see what it can add.

Because, after all, if you feel stuck, don't you want to put all of your brain resources to finding a solution?

The strategy of drawing has 2 big benefits. First, it helps your brain understand a situation more deeply. Second, it helps identify action steps you can take more easily.

Let me share an example of how you might put this into action, how to draw something out and how it can be beneficial.

First, though, let's address the concern I'm guessing a lot of you have. When I said draw, who thought to themselves, I'm not an artist?

Most of my clients say this to me when I tell them we're going to be drawing. Deb, they say, I am horrible at drawing.

It's true, most of us are not trained artists, and I know that you are capable of putting pen to paper to create some sort of image. Stick figures are fine. Blobs and arrows are fine. This is not about being perfect. It is about allowing your right hemisphere to help you make sense of a situation without all the emotional baggage getting in the way. I promise that if you allow yourself to draw it out, you'll be amazed at how it can shift your thinking and help you decide what to do next.

Here's an example of how you might draw out something that feels emotionally charged.

I was talking with a client who was feeling overwhelmed about all the things on her plate at work. She had a lot of responsibilities, and as she talked about them, I could hear anxiety and defeat in her voice. She said, it feels like it's too much. I don't know where to start.

I asked her to grab some pen and paper. She did, and I said, draw what you feel on the paper. She said, I can't draw, to which I said, of course you can. Just start drawing out the big buckets of all the things on your plate.

As she did, her emotions shifted and she started looking lighter. She became curious and had some fun finding a way to capture her work on paper. She showed me her drawing, and I saw that she had drawn a whole bunch of filing cabinets representing her various roles.

Step 1 when drawing out a problem is simply to put pen to paper and start. Create a representation of what's going on.

The next step is to embellish the drawing. After my client had a first version of her filing cabinets, I asked her questions to expand on the drawing. Like: what's the connection between the different filing cabinets? Which ones are movable and on wheels? Who else is helping you manage them? Which ones can be pushed to the background? Which ones are messiest inside?

She continued to add to her drawing. She added wheels on some of them. She created pathways between some cabinets, and she identified ones that had the messiest folders that needed straightening.

We engaged her right hemisphere and the power of metaphor to help her more clearly see the situation from a bigger picture perspective.

That's the first big main benefit of drawing it out. There's always more to add to a picture. When we start adding details to our picture, we see, for example, that it's not as limiting as we initially thought. We realize there might be more that's going on than initially came to mind. And this invites us to see possibilities.

When we shift our perspective, we can see solutions more easily. That's the second big benefit of drawing out a problem: it helps us make a decision and choose an action we can take to move forward.

Coming back to my client's example, after she drew her filing cabinets and moved some around on her drawing to represent how they felt in terms of importance, she had a fuller understanding of all the things on her plate. Emotionally, she was much calmer. She was no longer overwhelmed and upset – her emotions had calmed down and she was ready to take action.

When I asked her what her next few baby steps would be, she had ideas. One, she identified someone who was going to help her with a big task. Two, she saw that she needed to do some organizing. This corresponded to her cleaning up some data. She knew what she needed to do. She felt more in control and she felt more productive.

Putting pen to paper and drawing it out, allows new ways of thinking using our right hemisphere way of thinking, which leads to new ideas and new solutions.

Let's bring this to you. I invite you to try this strategy now or later today.

Think about a current challenge where you feel like you can't think clearly because there are too many emotions.

Grab some pen and paper, and draw the situation. Create a representation on the paper that shows what it's like. Keep going. Add in details, who else is there? What's the weather like? And what's missing that you wish was included?

After you've expanded your drawing, look at the picture and ask yourself, where can I start? What's one piece I can tackle? Create a baby action step, do it, and then celebrate that you moved forward.

If you found this exercise fun, try it with a colleague or family member. The next time they talk about a challenge, ask them to draw it out. And coach them to help them find a possible solution.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you found today's episode interesting, please share it with a friend. As always, if you need help getting unstuck with your challenges, please email me at [deb@debelbaum.com](mailto:deb@debelbaum.com). I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!