



How the THINK Skill Brings More Peace to Your Relationships

By David Mandani, **MATS, MSW, LCSW** CA License No. 76182 | TX License No. 103973

You know the moment. Your son says something cutting. Your adult child hangs up on you. Your daughter shuts down mid-sentence. And before you can think, you've already reacted. Sharp words and a slammed door, and you're wondering if things can ever change.

The THINK skill was built for exactly this. Rooted in Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) and grounded in the biblical rhythm of being slow to speak, quick to listen, and slow to become angry (James 1:19, NIV), it gives you five questions to ask before you react so that you can instead respond with wisdom.

For parents of children of any age with mental illness, those five questions can turn a difficult conversation into one that brings you closer.

What Is the THINK Skill?

The THINK skill in DBT is an acronym designed to reduce conflict by slowing down automatic reactions. The five letters stand for:

- T** = Think of their perspective
- H** = Have empathy
- I** = Check your interpretations
- N** = Notice where they are trying
- K** = Lead with kindness

The framework has been used in partial hospitalization programs, intensive outpatient settings, and family therapy with both adolescents and adults living with severe mental illness. What makes it different from general advice to "just calm down" is that each letter gives you a specific

question to answer. Instead of trying to suppress your feelings, you're redirecting your attention long enough to respond the way you actually want to.

Why Do You React Instead of Respond?

When your child says something hurtful, your brain treats it as a threat. The amygdala, your brain's alarm center, fires before the reasoning part of your mind can catch up. Dr. Dan Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA, calls this "flipping your lid." Your thinking brain goes offline, and you react from pure emotion.

That's true for everyone. But for parents who have been caregiving for years, the threshold is lower and your emotional bandwidth is thinner. In HBT's 2025 study, parents reported an average of 15.6 years in the caregiving journey, and a quarter scored in the low range for both well-being and hope. When your tank is that low, even a small comment can send you over the edge.

Reacting is automatic, fast, and driven by emotion. Responding is slower, intentional, and guided by your values. When you're trying to react vs. respond, the difference isn't willpower or emotional intelligence. It's whether you have a framework that gives the thinking part of your brain a few seconds to come back online.

That's what THINK does. Each letter is a pause button for your brain.

T: Think of their Perspective

Before you react, ask: "How are they seeing this?"

This is the hardest step for most parents, because your child may have just said something that felt deeply unfair. But trying to see the situation from the other person's perspective doesn't mean agreeing with them. It means stepping out of your shoes long enough to notice what the situation looks like from theirs.

Your adult child who snapped at you on the phone might be embarrassed about needing help. Your teenager who rolled their eyes might be scared of the appointment you just scheduled.

Scripture puts it this way: *"In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others"* (Philippians 2:3-4, NIV).

When you pause to answer the "T" question, that doesn't mean you're abandoning your perspective. You're just making room to consider theirs.

H: Have Empathy

Ask: "What might they be feeling right now?"

Again, empathy doesn't mean agreement. You don't have to approve of what your child said or how they said it. Empathy simply means making room for what they might be feeling, even if you don't fully understand it.

Empathy is what lowers defenses. When a caregiver responds with empathy rather than correction, conflict tends to de-escalate and the other person becomes more willing to engage.

Romans 12:15 says, "*Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn*" (NIV). You don't have to fix their pain. You just have to sit in it with them, even for a moment. That willingness to sit, rather than to solve, is often the thing that changes the temperature of a conversation.

I: Check Your Interpretations

Ask: "What are some possible explanations or favorable interpretations for my loved one's behavior?"

When tempers run high, our brains default to the most negative explanation available. "They're being manipulative." "They don't care." "They're doing this on purpose." These conclusions feel true in the moment because strong emotions make our thinking black and white.

Before you act on your first interpretation, come up with at least one other possible explanation. Not a rosy, pretend-everything-is-fine version. A realistic alternative.

Maybe your daughter's sharp tone is shame rather than defiance. Maybe your son's refusal to call is because he doesn't know how to start the conversation.

When you assume positive intent, or even neutral intent, you give yourself room to respond to the person in front of you instead of the villain your tired brain created.

John 7:24 says, "*Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly*" (NIV). Judging correctly means looking past the surface behavior to what might be driving it.

N: Notice What You Might Miss

Ask: "What have they been doing to show they care, even in small ways?"

When conflict is constant, your brain starts filtering out the good. You stop seeing the small efforts, the moments of restraint, the quiet attempts to make things right. This step is about training your eyes to catch what your frustration or exhaustion is blocking.

Maybe your child made you a cup of coffee without being asked, or simply held back from yelling when you know they wanted to. Maybe they said "sorry" even though the apology was clumsy and incomplete. These are signs of someone who is trying, in the best way they know how, while fighting something you can't see.

Philippians 4:8 offers a useful lens: "*Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, think about such things*" (NIV). You don't need to ignore the hard stuff, but you can refuse to let the hard stuff be the only thing you see.

K: Lead With Kindness

Ask: "How can I be clear about what I need while still being kind?"

Kindness doesn't mean saying yes to everything or letting harmful behavior slide. It means delivering truth in a way the other person can actually receive.

A practical way to think about this: kind, firm, and consistent. Can you hold your boundary without raising your voice? Can you say what needs to be said without adding a verbal jab? Can you be the same person in Monday's calm conversation and Wednesday's heated one?

Colossians 4:6 puts it this way: "*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt*" (NIV). Grace without truth is enabling. Truth without grace is a weapon. The goal is both, held together from a place of love.

What If It Feels Fake?

It probably will, at least at first. That's normal.

THINK is a skill, and skills feel awkward before they feel natural. You might choose kind words when every part of you wants to say something sharp, and it feels dishonest. But here's what's actually happening: you're choosing to respond based on your values instead of your emotions. That's not fake. That's maturity.

It's the same principle behind James 1:19. Being slow to speak and slow to anger isn't a personality trait. It's a choice you make in the moment, over and over, until it starts to reshape how you move through conflict.

And if your emotions are so strong that you can't access any of the five steps, that's okay too. Step away. Say, "I love you, but I need a few minutes so we can come back to this well." That pause is THINK in action.

Start With One Letter, Not All Five

Getting started with this skill and trying to remember (let alone practice!) all five of these steps is unrealistic for most people.

Instead, I typically encourage people to pick one letter that resonates with them, and start with that.

Maybe it's H, because empathy feels like the thing you've lost after years of caregiving. Maybe it's I, because you know you tend to assume the worst. Maybe it's K, because you already know what kindness does, you just need permission to slow down enough to offer it.

Pick that one letter and apply it to one conversation or one text message. See if even one small thing shifts. Stay with it for a while, then add another when it starts to feel natural.

Don't think of it as mastering a framework; think of it as adding more tools to your toolbox for building the relationship you want with your loved one.

Begin Practicing THINK Today

Mental illness doesn't come with easy answers, and relationships built under that kind of weight take time to heal. But THINK gives you something concrete to do in those heated moments where a single sentence can either push your child further away or keep the door open.

You don't have to get this right every time. Just keep choosing to try. Isaiah 40:29-31 promises strength to the weary, so ask the Lord for it.

If you're a parent carrying this kind of weight, you don't have to carry it alone. [Hope for Brighter Tomorrows](#) was built by a mother who has been where you are. Through [online events](#), prayer and support calls, and a community of parents who understand, we walk alongside families at every stage. Whenever you're ready, there's a place for you here.

If your loved one is in immediate danger or you are concerned about their safety, contact the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988. If there is an emergency, call 911 and let the operator know your loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis.

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