

What Do You Say When You Talk to Yourself?



YOU CAN CHANGE THE NEGATIVE INTERNAL DIALOGUE THAT QUIETLY ERODES YOUR SELF-CONFIDENCE AND LIMITS YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS.

MUCH OF OUR DISTRESS is due to the constant conversations we have with ourselves. Psychologists call the thoughts that are constantly running in our minds “internal dialogue.” Unfortunately, we often talk ourselves into underachieving. Unfortunately, our mental talks are going on all the time, and if they are programmed with negative messages, they become a prime cause of distress and they unconsciously create the foundations that form our self-destructive habits.

Self-sabotaging internal dialogue comes with many disguises and in various forms — attitudes, beliefs, evaluations, expectations, interpretations or predictions — but they all tend to make us feel badly and act ineffectively. Some common examples:

- “Why ask, he will never give me a referral?”
- “Oh, no, I’m going to be late — can’t this traffic move any faster?”
- “I can’t tell her what I think; she doesn’t care what a rookie thinks.”
- “I spent my entire career transacting business and now they want me to change. I’m too old, scared, dumb, tired, or [choose a put-down] to change.”

You get the idea A great many people, Type B as well as Type A, devote an extraordinary amount of attention and energy to useless, unproductive self-talks. Often these messages impose unreasonably high standards on both their work and themselves. Even more often, they convey the message, “I am a victim. Do you think I would do these things to myself? I would have to be crazy.” They do not believe they control their thoughts, feelings, behavior or their lives.

The result: Feelings become hot and exaggerated. Energy that could be used elsewhere gets tied up in self-talks that make life seem hopelessly out of control. Behavior becomes counter-productive and self-sabotaging as your performance anxiety increases in strength and destroys your self-confidence.

Data suggest that we can choose how stress will affect us. Replacing certain negative and irrational self-talks with more constructive, helpful ones lets you cultivate and emotional strength that reacts to stress in a different and more effective manner. There’s clinical evidence that says the emotionally strong — whose self-talks are pos-

itive — actually live longer than those who lack sufficient emotional strength. For example a Canadian study on 3,000 senior citizens showed that those who maintained optimistic attitudes about their health had a smaller risk of dying over a seven-year period than those whose attitudes were pessimistic, regardless of how doctors rated their health objectively.

Typical Self-Sabotaging Internal Dialogues Let’s take a quick look at these internal dialogues. When we discuss one that you use, take the time to write about and then correct it in your performance journal. The journal writing step is important because it

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initiates the change process.

Let's look at these negative self-talks and some of the possible antidotes, i.e. positive self-talks that can be used as substitute internal dialogue.

1. "Things upset me."

This internal dialogue topic implies that external events determine our emotional reaction.

Antidote: "I upset myself." Only by accepting responsibility for your behavior can you begin to make changes that will help you.

2. "I have no control over the nature, intensity, and duration of my emotional reactions."

Responses to stress are not fixed. You can, in fact, temper the intensity of your reaction. This is especially true if you can anticipate a stressful experience and have a chance to talk to yourself about it. But even if it happens suddenly and you feel overwhelmed, you can still gain emotional balance by realistically reviewing the circumstances and holding constructive, rather than destructive, conversations with yourself.

The fear that "being upset" might last indefinitely is contradicted by common sense: We all know from experience that a response to the same event changes and is tempered by the passing of time.

Antidote: "I may not be able to control getting upset, but I have significant control over the intensity and

duration of my feelings."

3. "My emotional and stress responses are inherited."

You are not your parents. As you grew from infancy to adulthood, your genetic makeup remained the same, but you made dramatic gains in controlling your emotions and dealing with the frustration. So don't assume you're stuck because of your heredity. Stress is not an inherited response.

Antidote: "My feelings and behaviors are learned, and if they are ineffective, they can be unlearned."

4. "I can't change the way I feel."

You have changed over the years, and you will continue to change. However, you will have more control over the process of change if you learn to talk to yourself realistically and constructively.

Antidote: "I can change my emotional responses to stress with realistic, constructive self-talks."

5. "Things should and must do as I demand."

Expectations are a major source of unnecessary stress. The demands they imply come for two attitudes: perfectionism and the belief that human behavior is governed by rigid rules.

Perfectionists are hypersensitive to signs of imperfection. Their demand for perfect functioning is really an attempt to suppress and compensate for the painful fear that they will fail in some

way and attract criticism that "proves" they are inadequate. The more fearful they are, the more demanding they are that everything be done exactly right.

Perfectionists especially tend to believe they get upset because things go wrong. They do not realize they upset themselves by their own habitual responses to the stresses of life. Instead, they think that the only way to be free of distress is to "make things" go right. Their vigilant watchfulness for any signs that they or others do not measure up leads to the development of anxiety, tension, and muscular and/or psychological rigidity. "Things" usually go worse, not better.

The belief that human behavior must be governed by rigid rules — "Woulda," "Coulda," "Shoulda," and "Must" — also produces and then exacerbates anger. "You should have known he was not going to give you a referral." Focusing attention and energy on the past will not help you resolve today's performance problems.

Antidote: "It would be great if everything was easy, but I can handle anything that I have to confront. This business is not that difficult. Prospecting is actually fun."

6. "I can't believe it. I don't understand it."

If you don't give yourself a chance to understand the problem, how can you deal with it? Insisting in your internal dialogue that you cannot figure things

out will only plunge you into feeling more out of control, exacerbate the stress you are under and inhibit your ability to perform. A more constructive approach would be to acknowledge that there must be a reason.

Antidote: “I can understand my sources of stress if I put my mind to it.”

7. “It’s so awful or horrible, I can’t stand it.”

It’s called awful-izing or horrible-izing. Because the words are emotionally loaded, they keep you stuck at the point of reacting. Instead of attempting to solve the problem, we convince ourselves we cannot solve it. If you exaggerate your feelings by horrible-izing, you will get stuck in stress. Instead, describe the situation realistically and moderately, with more neutral words, like “unfortunate,” “sad,” “painful,” “uncomfortable,” or “embarrassing.” This defuses your reaction without preventing you from experiencing it.

Antidote: “Things are never as bad as I can make them seem.”

8. “My shortcomings make me a bad person; a loser; a failure.”

We all have problem areas to work on, yet some of us manage to continue to be productive in spite of our shortcomings, while others whose imperfections are no worse become petrified by a self-sabotaging internal dialogue. Instead of concentrating on the effects of a particular behavior, try thinking of your behavior as part of a mosaic. Each thing you do is one piece of an extremely complex design — you. You can behave in ways that reflect shortcomings, but you can nevertheless be liked, respected, and loved despite your mis-

takes. Remember: Your worth isn’t at stake every time you make a move.

Antidote: “I can accept what I am even if I have shortcomings in certain situations.”

9. “Others think as little of me as I do myself.”

The more we think negatively of ourselves, the more we assume that others think the same of us. But in fact, other people spend very little time thinking about us at all; most of the time they are thinking about themselves. Other people will almost always take us at our own value.

Antidote: “Others will accept me as I present myself — and I can present myself in the best possible light.”

10. “It’s hopeless. Things will never get any better.”

This is in many ways the worst of the irrational self-talks because it eliminates hope — the possibility that things (including feelings) can get better in the future. It also enables stress to do its greatest psychological and physiological damage. A feeling of hopelessness is the common thread that runs through the fabric of lives burdened by stress.

Yet things not only can, but very likely will, get better. As you know, you may be fatigued today or have the flu, but rest will help and you will feel refreshed after a time. You may be out of a job this month, but working again in a month or a year. You may even have lost a spouse, but you can survive to love again. And even if your situation doesn’t change, you can change so that you can live with it better. You don’t have to make today’s problems into a lifelong straitjacket. The simple


passage of time really does make a difference. Things do get better.

Antidote: “There is always hope, because in the long run things will look different — especially if I can learn how to cope better with them.”

Changing Your Internal Dialogue

Changing your internal dialogue is a major step in the process of changing the old, stressful mental habits and increasing your emotional strength. Everyone has an individual version of the self-talks outlined above. I’m sure you’ve recognized at least a few of your own already. This is your first step: to gain intellectual insight and identify your own irrational self-talks. Then you can replace them with the antidotal, positive self-talks that build emotional strength.

Initially, you may notice that your positive self-talks are still bogged down in old feelings. Stick it out. Old habits die hard, and for a while your habitual responses will resist the new way of thinking. But if you persist, you will overcome this resistance.

If you practice your new thinking, you’ll no longer squander your emotional energy on overreacting to minor stress. Instead of spending a dollar’s worth of energy on a ten-cent problem, you can now give major and minor problems the amount of energy each is worth. In doing so, you’ll become like a good athlete, for whom economy of motion and energy is the mark of mature development. And you will have enough energy left over to discover the things you really value in life. And that’s what you want, isn’t it? 

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