



The Power of SELF-TALK

To make your inner voice a force for success and happiness, says a noted psychologist, substitute accurate, positive thoughts for those false messages of fear.

by Harriet B. Braiker

They say there's nothing wrong with talking to yourself, but when you start answering back, it's time to worry. They're wrong. Talking aloud to yourself in public isn't a sign of mental health, but holding an internal dialogue is quite normal and very useful.

In fact, inner conversations have a powerful impact on emotional well-being and motivation. Becoming aware of exactly what you are saying to yourself about yourself can help you understand why you react the way you do to events and people in your life. It can also give you a handle on controlling your moods, repeating your successes and short-circuiting your shortcomings.

Positive self-talk can do a lot to give you the confidence that frees you to use your talents to the fullest. If public speaking makes you nervous, use your inner voice to reassure yourself: "You can do it. You've done it well before. Why else would they have asked you to do it again?" Behind your nervousness may well be negative thoughts such as: "There are 300 people out there! I'll never hold their attention." Since self-talk has a way of becoming self-fulfilling prophecy, uncountered negative thinking can spell trouble. That's why it's so important to monitor your inner voice.

But don't confuse positive self-talk with mindless positive thinking, happy affirmations or, even worse, self-delusion. For example, if I were to tell myself that I'm no good at artistic endeavors, my self-talk would be negative but not flawed. The truth is, I have difficulty drawing a straight line. On the other hand, if I say I can't do anything right, that would be flawed, overgeneralized thinking. What you want is accurate, logical self-talk.

There are times, though, when you start hearing a chorus of negative messages from your inner voice. Then it's time to correct them by using some of the techniques of cognitive therapy I'll describe. The key is to recognize the logical flaws and self-sabotaging messages and replace the errors with more rational and appropriate thinking. In high-tech terms, it helps you uncover the bugs in your mental computer (see "10 Cognitive Traps") and reprogram your mind with better software.

Take the case of a 39-year-old mother who has persistent feelings of depression. Her inner voice tells her: "I'm lost. I feel like such a failure. I know I should be more patient with my kids, but they're such losers. I've given up even talking to them. It's just not fair. My friends' kids are perfect but mine are a mess and so is my life." These ruminations are a garbage bag of negatively loaded words and labels ("failure," "losers"); errors in the way she processes information ("My friends' kids are perfect"); faulty assumptions ("It's not fair"—neither, of course, is life), and guilt-inducing expectations ("I should . . .").

This mother needs to identify these errors and distortions and develop a more accurate internal dialogue ("I know I'm not a perfect mother, but nobody is perfect. I do the best I can with my kids, and they're not perfect either. But, if I work on being more patient and communicating better, maybe the problems we've been having can be worked out"). The revised self-talk improves her mood and motivation, diffuses her anger and directs her toward actions that can address some of her difficulties. This can eventually lead to positive changes in her behavior that will improve her relationship with her family.

Self-Talk Trouble: Three Tip-Offs

Negative self-talk can trip you up any time, but these three common situations are particularly good times to monitor your inner voice for negative thoughts.

When what is happening to you doesn't jibe with what you expect or predict, flawed self-talk may be the cause. Think of a newly divorced woman who goes to a party expecting men to approach her, with no effort on her part to attract them. When it doesn't happen, she feels confused, insecure and depressed. If she'd examined her self-talk before the party, she might have realized she was operating on an outmoded idea, "nice women don't start conversations with strangers, so I should wait for people to come to me."

It might have been more helpful had her self-talk been more along the lines of "I'm an intelligent, attractive woman. I have plenty of interesting things to talk about. I'll look for chances to start conversations with the people I meet."

The next sign that it's time to check on your self-talk is when

you sense in yourself a pattern of negative behavior towards others. For example, a man suspects that he's falling into a pattern of ignoring orders from his superiors at work, or conveniently "forgetting" meetings he should attend. Listening closely to what he tells himself about his bosses and his work might forestall career stagnation or a firing.

Does he fear his bosses, dislike them, envy them—or is he unsure of his own skills? Whatever he hears, it's time to come up with a more realistic evaluation of what's happening. He needs to

10 Cognitive Traps

1. ALL-OR-NOTHING THINKING: You see things in black-or-white categories. If a situation is anything less than perfect, you see it as a total failure.

2. OVERGENERALIZATION: You see a single event as a never-ending pattern of defeat by using the words *always* or *never* when you think about it.

3. MENTAL FILTER: You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively. One word of criticism erases all the praise you've received.

4. DISCOUNTING THE POSITIVE: You reject positive experiences by insisting they "don't count." If you do a good job, you tell yourself that anyone could have done as well.

5. JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS: You interpret things negatively when there are no facts to support your conclusion. Two common variations are *mind-reading* (you arbitrarily conclude that someone is reacting negatively to you) and *fortune-telling* (you assume and predict that things will turn out badly).

6. MAGNIFICATION: You exaggerate the importance of your problems and shortcomings, or you minimize your desirable qualities. This is also called the "binocular trick."

7. EMOTIONAL REASONING: You assume that your negative emotions reflect the way things really are: "I feel guilty. I must be a rotten person."

8. "SHOULD" STATEMENTS: You tell yourself that things should be the way you hoped or expected them to be. Many people try to motivate themselves with *shoulds* and *shouldn'ts*, as if they had to be punished before they could be expected to do anything.

9. LABELING: This is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. Instead of saying "I made a mistake," you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a loser."

10. PERSONALIZATION AND BLAME: You hold yourself personally responsible for events that aren't entirely under your control.

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consider his own strengths and figure out the best ways to use them to deal with what's really bothering him at work and is causing him to avoid dealing with his superiors.

A third signal that it's time to pay attention to self-talk is a stressful life event or a personal transition of some kind. Because crises often mark turning points, old ways of looking at the world can become obsolete under the new conditions that are changing your life.

Take a woman who has been a company's token woman executive. She's come to expect not to be listened to or taken seriously by her superiors. If she then moves to an organization that respects women's abilities and expects them to perform well, she may find that her views about dealing with management need to change — and with them the way she presents herself to others on the job.

Capturing Your Self-Talk

How do you tune into your self-talk to analyze and correct it? Some people seem inherently more aware of their inner conversations than others and have little difficulty mentally "turning up the volume." One of my patients is notable in this regard. When she was a child, her abusive parents administered both physical punishment and emotional isolation. Now, as an adult, instead of reporting what she's thinking or feeling the way most people do, the woman self-talks out loud.

In one group session, she answered a question about how she felt after a confrontation with a coworker this way: "Susan [her own name], you don't have to get your feelings hurt over what this guy did. You'll be much worse off if you start to cry now, so just keep yourself together." Susan had apparently learned as a child to rely on her own company and self-talk to comfort her and calm her down. Now accessing it is second nature.

Most people, though, need ways to capture their inner dialogues. There are several techniques that can help. First, at random times throughout the day, ask yourself, "What am I saying to myself right now?" Then, if you can, write down your thoughts along with a few notes about the situation you are in and how you're feeling. Your goal is to refine your self-talk to make it as accurate as possible. Before you begin, it's essential to record your self-talk without any censorship.

You can use uncomfortable emotions or moods — such as stress, depression and anxiety — as cues for listening to self-talk. When this happens, identify the feeling as accurately as possible. Then ask yourself, "What was I saying to myself right before I started feeling this way?" or, "What have I been saying to myself since I've been feeling this way?"



Situations that you anticipate might be difficult for you are also good times to access your self-talk. Write down a description of the coming event. Then ask yourself, "What I am I saying to myself now about the event?" If your thoughts are negative, think how you can use your strengths to turn these disruptive feelings into more positive ones and help make a potentially difficult experience into a success.

It's useful to compare your self-talk predictions (what you thought would or should happen in a given situation) with what actually took place. If the reality conflicts with your predictions — as it often does when your self-talk is in error — pinpoint where your inner dialogue needs adjustments to fit reality.

You're bound to have a purely subjective view of your own thoughts. So it's helpful and often necessary to enlist the help of a sympathetic but objective friend, mate or therapist who is willing to listen, collaborate in the assessment of your experience and help identify the ways your self-talk may be distorted.

Using Your Inner Voice

How you respond to your self-talk makes all the difference. First, remember the positive elements and use them in other situations where your thoughts are negative. For the negative thoughts you've uncovered, first identify how they are wrong. Then argue actively with yourself to correct the errors. Construct challenging arguments to your erroneous assumptions and beliefs ("If I'm such an unlikable person, why do my old friends still call me to get together?").

Next, change your inner dialogue by replacing flawed ways of talking to yourself with better ways. Remember that you're after accuracy and rationality, not self-hype or excessively positive ideas; such mindless optimism is equally distorted.

Flawed self-talk, by its very nature, is often best captured when you are feeling down on yourself or depressed. Unfortunately, since your bad mood has tilted your thinking, this is precisely when you're least able to be truly objective and rational. So it's especially valuable at these dark times to adopt the perspective of someone else you feel confident is on your side. Try to look at yourself the way they would, and use that perspective to come up with accurate self-talk that fits reality and points you in a new and positive direction.

Since thoughts are fleeting, writing them down as they occur to you will help the process along. Try a triple-column technique to analyze them for errors and construct rational rebuttals: First, divide a sheet of paper into three columns. Then think back to an event that has elicited negative feelings. In the first column, write down your "automatic thoughts" — the samples of uncensored self-talk you've gathered.

Next, with the list of flawed thinking as a guide ("10 Cognitive Traps"), scrutinize your thoughts to see if they mirror any of these errors. Note errors in the second column. Last, write a rebuttal for each flawed thought in the third column.

For example, let's assume you're upset because you didn't do as well as you had hoped in a job interview. In the first column, the self-talk you have recorded might read something like, "I always mess important things up this way. I'll never get that job . . . I probably won't ever get any job. The interviewer just hated me, I could tell. What a bozo I am."

In the second column you identify various thoughts as errors of over-generalization, or jumping to conclusions, or labeling, and so forth. In the third column, your rational rebuttal might read, "OK, I didn't do so well in answering a few questions because I was anxious. But I did answer a lot very well."

"Actually, I don't know the man at all, so I can't really judge his

reaction to me. If I have the opportunity for a second interview, I'll make sure to add the information I left out. If I don't, I'll have learned from the experience and I'll do better next time."

This may be a lot of writing, but it's the best way to get started. You'll soon be skilled enough to do it in your head without writing it down.

Moving from Talk to Action

The real power of self-talk lies in how it changes behavior. Simply correcting your internal programming will improve your mood, but it won't do the most important job. The ultimate purpose of examining what is going on inside your head is to change actions that are self-defeating. Thinking correctly does alter your negative moods, but enduring change comes only with modifying your behavior.

If, for example, your self-talk tells you, "I can't break up this relationship because I can't stand being alone, even though the relationship is harmful to me," you're likely to stay locked in the same unhappy situation. To make your self-talk more accurate, you might say, "I feel anxious about breaking up and facing the idea that I might be alone for awhile. But if I really want to give myself a chance for the kind of relationship that will make me happy, I must let go of the one I'm in."

Now comes the clincher: To activate the full power of your self-talk, you must follow the path that your new, accurate inner messages point. In the example, you would need to actually terminate your current relationship and, with the aid of further encouraging and supportive self-talk, get back into social situations where you can meet new people and begin forming new relationships.

To find the behavior that goes with your new self-talk, ask yourself these questions: What behavior has my erroneous self-talk generated? How has it hindered me from reaching my goals? What actions does my corrected self-talk suggest? How will my

life be better when I change? When and how will I start to change?

Accurate self-talk should enable you to know how your behavior needs to change. And behavior is what counts. As an old proverb advises: "To know but not to act is not to know at all." □

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The Psychology of Self Talk

The methods described in this article—using self-talk to elevate your moods and change your behavior—have their basis in cognitive therapy. The best-known proponents of talking to yourself are psychiatrist Aaron Beck and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania, who developed cognitive therapy. David Burns popularized the technique for the treatment of depression in his best-seller, *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*.

The guiding tenet of cognitive therapy is that beliefs and thoughts, as represented by your words and assumptions, have the greatest impact on your emotions, behavior and state of mind. So by directly assaulting self-hindering thought, you can profoundly improve your emotional well-being and overall functioning.

In brain-dominance terminology, cognitive therapy is purely left-sided, since it relies on rational, analytical methods. But self-sabotaging self-talk can be attached and corrected from a right-brain perspective as well. Personal Mythology theory provides a symbolic avenue for changing self-talk by focusing on the stories you tell yourself about your place in the world; indeed, about the purpose of life itself.

Contrary to what its name implies, personal mythology does not mean false beliefs. It refers to the sum total of your self-talk statements and how they are integrated into full-blown belief systems. The stories that embody these beliefs—stories derived from larger cultural myths—strongly affect how you interpret what happens to you, and therefore how you choose to feel and behave.

Understanding your personal mythology can help you discover how outmoded myths block your personal growth. You learn to revise these myths with new guiding beliefs about who you are, new myths that serve to help you grow toward the goals you seek.

Sam Keen, who writes and conducts seminars on personal mythology (see *Psychology Today*, December 1988, "The Stories We Live By"), tells us that families create their own myths and rituals just as cultures do. Each member's place within the family is defined by the stories. But as Keen points out, the legacy and burden of family myths are not inevitable. Responsibility for them rests on each individual. Unless we become conscious of our personal myths, we risk being dominated by them. We need to reinvent and revise familial stories to fit our changing lives.

—H.B.B.

