

SELF-TALK – HOW WE UPSET OURSELVES

Most people have an almost constant stream of inner self-talk. It is usually so automatic and subtle that we don't notice it or the effect it has on our moods and feelings.

Self-talk is often irrational but almost always sounds like the truth. Self-talk can start a panic attack and keep it going. Negative self-talk often triggers a depressive episode. Until you change your self-talk, recovery is very difficult, even with our modern psychiatric drugs.

Your style of self-talk usually starts in childhood and soon becomes a bad habit. You weren't born with a predisposition to fearful self-talk. You probably learned to think that way from parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, your teachers, other children, other people who influenced your life, and even movies and TV.

Like any other bad habit, self-talk can be changed. You can learn to replace upsetting self-talk with positive, supportive mental habits. But first you need to become mindful of the patterns of self-talk that trigger your feelings of depression and/or anxiety.

The skills of self-observation are critical in learning how to break this habit. These skills can be learned through relaxation exercises and through paying attention to the thoughts you are having. Because most people are unaware of how they are talking to themselves on an ongoing basis, most are quite surprised to learn how consistently critical and mean they can be to themselves.

Overcoming upsetting self-talk and forming new habits is a slow process, but, if you want to, you can do it. Many other people have recovered from problems with depression and anxiety by learning to recognize their upsetting self-talk and choosing new self-talk styles that now protect them from self-induced emotional upsets.

Psychologists have discovered common ways that depressed and anxious people tend to talk to themselves. Perhaps you can recognize a few of these upsetting self-talk patterns in your own unique self-talk style.

SELF-TALK – BELIEFS THAT OFTEN CAUSE ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

EMOTIONAL PERFECTIONISM: “I *should* always feel happy, confident, and in control of my emotions.”

FEAR OF EMOTIONS: “I *should* never feel angry, anxious, inadequate, jealous, or vulnerable.”

FEAR OF CONFLICT: “People who love each other shouldn’t fight.”

ENTITLEMENT: “People should be the way I expect them to be.” “Things should work out the way I want them to, and if they don’t that is awful and I can’t stand it.”

LOW FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE: “I should never be frustrated. Life should be easy.”

PERFECTIONISM: “I must never fail or make a mistake.” “People will not love me or accept me as a flawed or vulnerable human being.”

FEAR OF FAILURE OR COMING UP SHORT: “My being a worthwhile person depends on what I achieve.” (or – how attractive I am or my intelligence or my social status).

FEAR OF REJECTION OR BEING ALONE: “If I’m alone, then I’m going to feel miserable, unloved and unfulfilled. If I’m not loved, then life is not worth living.”

SELF-TALK STYLES THAT CAUSE DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

ALL OR NOTHING THINKING: Thinking in extremes with no middle ground. Everything is wonderful or everything is awful. You are complete success or a complete failure. “Either/or” thinking.

OVER-GENERALIZATION: A single bad event becomes a pattern of defeat. A job interview that does not lead to an offer arouses fears of lifelong unemployment. Pain of reflection usually comes from over-generalization.

MENTAL FILTER: You pick out the negative details in any situation and dwell on them, thus seeing the whole situation as negative.

IGNORING THE POSITIVE: You transform neutral or positive experiences into negative ones. Someone compliments you and you think “They are just saying that to be nice.” The price you pay is not being able to see the good in your life.

MIND READING: You assume that people are reacting to you in a negative way but you don’t check it out. You leave a message on a friend’s answering machine but she doesn’t call you back right away. You assume that she doesn’t want to talk to you.

FORTUNE TELLING: You predict that things will turn out badly no matter how good things are going. This gives you plenty to worry about.

MAGNIFICATION: You blow things way out of proportion. If you have a small setback, it is a total disaster. We *maximize* the bad.

MINIMIZING: You shrink the importance of things. When someone compliments you on doing an outstanding job, you say, “It was no big deal.” We *minimize* the good.

EMOTIONAL REASONING: You consider your feelings as evidence of the truth – “I feel inadequate so I must be a worthless person.”

“SHOULD STATEMENTS”: You criticize and judge yourself and other people with “shoulds”, “oughts”, “musts”, and “have tos.” This can make you feel guilty and like a total failure. When other people don’t live up to your “shoulds”, you feel frustrated, bitter or self-righteous.

LABELING: Instead of saying “I made a mistake” you tell yourself “I’m a jerk”, or a “fool”, or a “loser” or “I’m worthless.”

PERSONALIZATION AND BLAME: You blame yourself for something that is not entirely your fault, or you blame other people and deny your role in the problem.

HOW TO CHANGE UPSETTING SELF-TALK

MINDFULNESS: Become aware that your symptoms of depression or anxiety are getting more intense. Become aware of a pattern of upsetting self-talk that may be causing you to feel more upset. Write them down. On a scale of 1-10, how badly do you feel when you say those things to yourself?

STOP: What you are doing isn’t working, so it is time to do something different. This may seem painfully obvious and equally impossible. At the same time, it remains necessary. You may stop talking to yourself in a destructive way only to find yourself doing it again two minutes later. That’s okay! The point is to

continue being vigilant in monitoring your self-talk and interrupting the pattern. Write down the negative statements you are saying to yourself so you can continue to explore them and understand where they come from.

REFLECT: What are the upsetting self-talk statements that are going through your mind? Get out your lists, and see if you can recognize any of the common patterns. Are you “shoulding?” are you over-generalizing? Are you magnifying or minimizing?

ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

Is it really true?

Am I jumping to conclusions?

Is it to my advantage to think this way?

Is there another way to look at this situation?

Is it really as bad as it seems?

What is the worst that could happen?

Can I handle it?

Am I using any of the key words: should, must, always, never, ought to, have to

RECOGNIZE: Any self-talk that may be distorted, illogical or exaggerated.

REFRAME: Just like we can make a painting look different when we put it in a new frame, we can do the same with our self-talk. See if you can find a way to talk to yourself about the situation that is gentler, kinder, and more realistic. Give yourself a chance. Some find this very difficult to do. If you are having a hard time finding something else to say to yourself that you can actually believe, think of ways you would comfort a child or your best friend who was experiencing the same thing you are. What would you say to help them? You deserve the same kindness and caring that you would show them.

MINDFULNESS: After working through this exercise and reframing your self-talk, notice how you feel. On a scale of 1-10, where are you now? If there is a difference, what worked?