

Using self-talk to enhance career satisfaction and performance

On your way home from work, do you review your daily successes or focus on the obstacles you encountered? Do you berate yourself or wish you had someone else's skills?

Your self-talk may be inhibiting or limiting your effectiveness, satisfaction, and professional success. Self-talk is our internal dialogue, much of which occurs below the level of awareness, making it all the more insidious. The human mind seems to focus on the negative, and we tend to berate ourselves in ways we would never tolerate from a boss, spouse, or anyone else.

Negative thoughts affect our feelings, and negative feelings affect our thoughts in a vicious cycle that influences our behavior and performance. Negative thoughts are not uncommon, and most people will recognize some of the following: "It's going to be another one of those days." "I just know it won't work." "I already know I won't like it." "I've never been any good at that." "I just can't seem to get the work done." "Nothing seems to go right for me." "I always freeze in front of a group." "If only I were smarter." "If only I had more time."

The importance of this inner dialogue is

paramount, as we manifest such internalized thoughts. The brain simply believes what you tell it, whether the message is true or not. Every day each of us receives an endless stream of commands, directives, controls, inducements, and expectations from others. We have received this input for our entire lives, beginning with our parents. Unfortunately, we may still believe the messages we heard during childhood, some of which were false or destructive. From these messages we form a picture of ourselves—a picture that directs us to this day. What we put into our brains and the thoughts we have we get back in our performance. The challenge we face is how to make the best use of our self-talk to enhance our performance and professional satisfaction.

Transforming negative thoughts.

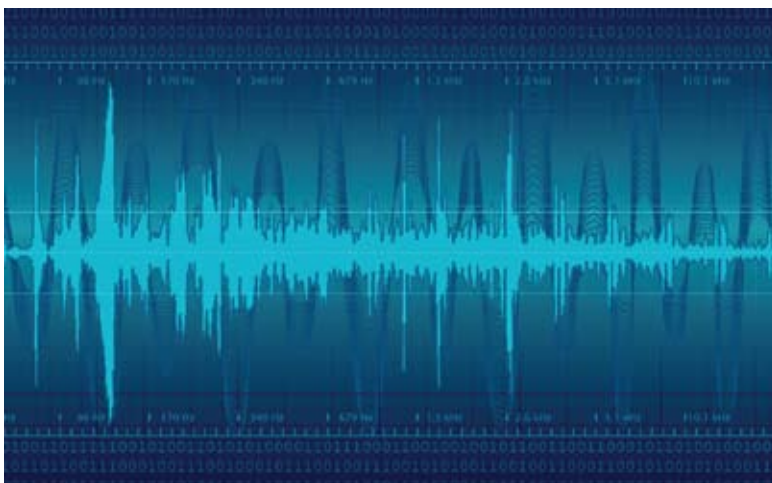
To fully utilize your inner dialogue, you

must replace the negative self-talk with positive and empowering affirmations. Learning to manage, control, and direct the resources of your mind is the greatest challenge you will ever face. An approach is to think of your mind as your "mental apartment"—the place you live with your thoughts. This mental apartment is furnished with everything you think about yourself and the world around you. Think of your thoughts as the furniture, which generally is "hand-me-downs" having come from other people. Imagine that most of this furniture, our negative thinking, is weary with age. In these furnishings, a strong piece, a positive thought, might seem out of place because it would be overshadowed in the clutter. You cannot discard all the old furniture or negative thoughts without replacing them with positive thoughts; otherwise, you will bring back the old because you need some "mental furniture." This changing of furniture means consciously taking responsibility for yourself. Positive

self-talk is the navigation system that you can use to chart your new destination and determine your course, direction, altitude, and speed.

To change your self-talk furniture, you must first listen to what you are saying to yourself. To break the cycle of negative thoughts and feelings, identify the specific thoughts that cause you to engage in negative self-talk. Start

by keeping a "thought record." You will probably notice that virtually all of your



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thoughts are self-critical and in the second person, such as “How could you be so stupid?” or “Can you believe what they are asking you to do now?” That they are in the second person is important because it is not you who is talking. Someone else, perhaps so long ago that you do not even remember it, said something hurtful to you and you internalized that message. Being acutely aware of this inner dialogue and those earlier insults or criticisms is a step toward erasing negative self-talk and changing your mental apartment furniture.

Confronting your inner critic. To change your self-talk, you must confront the second person or your inner critic, who probably isn’t dealing in truth. Optimistic people routinely argue with their inner critic and dispute self-blaming interpretations of failure or discouragement, while pessimists tend to submissively accept the most self-limiting interpretations. Realize that you will never on a sustained basis exceed your own self-image because it serves as an invisible ceiling, and your self-image is determined by your inner dialogue. Thus, it is critical to rewrite the self-limiting scripts that have been foisted upon you by your inner critic. When you encounter negative self-talk, analyze what you are saying to yourself. For example, who first told you you were stupid, or fat, or whatever? Why did it hurt? Why did you internalize that message? What have you been doing, perhaps inadvertently, to nurture that harmful aspect of your self-image? Tell your inner critic to stop and ask yourself the following: “What other points of view are there? How would someone else think about this? How would I think about this if I were feeling better? What are the actual facts? What is the worst that could happen? How bad is this going to get? What can I do when that happens?” Use your answers to develop your new self-talk.

Replacing negative self-talk with positive inner dialogue. Put your new self-talk in the present tense as if the change had already taken place. The

subconscious mind does not know what is true and what is not. In time, it will believe these new messages and act accordingly. You must paint an entirely new picture for your subconscious mind to derive the full benefit of your new self-talk. You must be specific and thorough as your mind will attempt to follow the exact wording of the directions you give it. Examples include the following: “I am a good listener.” “I am attentive, interested, and aware of everything that is going on around me.” “I have the courage to state my opinions.” “I take responsibility for myself and everything I say and do.” “Today I worked hard and though not everything worked out the way I had hoped, I feel good about myself, and tomorrow will be even better.”

Reframe your reactions to obstacles and setbacks. No matter what seemingly bad thing happens, chances are that someday you will look back and say it was the best thing that could have happened. When something bad happens, ask yourself “What is great about this?” or “How can I use this?” Let adversity become a teacher and door opener for you. Remember it is not what happens to you but how you react that determines its effect.

Replace disempowering questions with empowering questions. If you want to change the quality of your life, change the quality of your questions. Don’t ask, “Why do things like this always happen to me?” or “What did I do to deserve this?” Instead, ask, “What is actually happening?” “What is *not* happening?” “What can I do about this?” Act as soon as you start to berate yourself. You need to challenge, confront, and question before those hurtful words start to sink in. Use logic to generate alternatives to the gloom and doom of your inner critic.

Another useful approach is to replace negative self-talk with positive thoughts. Any time there is pandemonium in your mind, check to see if you need to eliminate the negative and replace it with the positive. One way to ensure that the dominant thought is positive is to program yourself with positive thoughts. Always focus on what you are

accomplishing versus what you are not. (“I made a perfectly good try.” “I did my best.” “I’m making progress.” “I am a good pharmacist.”)

Challenging negative labels. Everyone needs to challenge their self-sabotaging self-talk labels. Anytime you notice a negative label, immediately challenge the label for validity. It might be helpful to convert the label into a description such as, “I will always be learning.” Always talk to yourself tenderly. The labels you use create a self-fulfilling prophecy, so choose them wisely.

Your feelings are an indication of your self-talk. If you are feeling unenergetic, down, or like you cannot face the world, switch to self-talk that is positive: “It is going to be a great day.” “I am going to be successful today.” “I am up to the challenges that the day holds.” Your feelings will change. Positive expectations tend to become reality, so use your feelings as a barometer of your inner dialogue and change it when necessary.

Changing negative emotions with self-talk. Some examples of appropriate self-talk for freedom from worry include “My mind dwells only on those thoughts that create harmony, balance, and well-being within me and in the world around me.” “I choose to look at the world around me in the bright, healthy light of optimism and self-assurance.” “If I cannot affect it or direct it, I accept it.”

Most people do not think of complaining as negative self-talk, but it is. Anytime you complain about something, you are really saying three things: (1) something is bothering you; otherwise, you would not be wasting your time and mental energy complaining about it, (2) it is not your fault; otherwise, you would not be implicitly pointing a finger at someone else, and (3) there is nothing you can do about it; otherwise, you would be working on fixing the problem rather than whining about it. What happens over time, with thousands of episodes of complaining, is that each complaint creates in your self-talk a mindset of helplessness. Every time you complain,

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you are accepting victimhood for all the things you complain about, that are someone else's fault, that you are helpless to fix. For two weeks carry around a pen and paper and every time you hear yourself moan, whine, complain, finger point, or rumor monger, make a mark on your paper. Calculate how much time you have spent in the swamp of mental negativity. You may be appalled at how much complaining you do, most of which is never vocalized outside of your mind. All this time and energy are not available for more positive and constructive thinking. Start trying to turn every complaint into either a blessing or a constructive suggestion.

Reviewing and reinforcing your new self-talk. When continuously reviewing your new self-talk, make sure it is stated in the present tense, is specific, gets the job done without creating any unwanted side effects (weight loss and sickness), is easy to use, is practical, and is honest.

To reinforce positive self-talk, consider making your own positive tape, podcast, or CD. There is nobody who can motivate you but you, and the things you say to yourself either motivate you or do not. When you are having a good day, make notes about the things you like about yourself, about your future goals and dreams, and the things you know you must do in order to become your best self, as well as what it will take to achieve those goals and dreams. Using a microphone for your computer, record your notes and listen to them daily or when you find yourself using negative self-talk.

Suggested readings

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