Changing Your Self-Talk from a Liability to a Strength

by ERIC PATTERSON

Coping with Negative Self-Talk

You may be surprised to hear this, but every day, you talk to yourself. In fact, you speak to yourself constantly; there is a little voice in your head narrates each aspect of each day. When it is operating well, its internal dialogue motivates you to accomplish amazing achievements. When it is out of sorts, the voice in your head offers consistent criticism and this can result in you feeling powerless, hopeless and helpless. This is why coping with negative self-talk is important, so it does not cause excessive feelings of sadness or distress.

To gain control over your thoughts, feelings and behaviors, you must understand and control your self-talk, and you must understand the basics of coping with negative self-talk.

What Is Self-Talk?

Self-talk is the clinical term for the internal dialogue a person experiences throughout a day. Positive self-talk and self-love can be uplifting and encouraging, while negative self-talk leads to numerous unwanted effects.

Using the coronavirus pandemic as an example, self-talk influences a person’s reaction. When someone thinks, "the coronavirus is scary, potentially dangerous to some, and a massive inconvenience to others, but if I follow the precautions and stay safe, I can get through this", they will feel comfortable. When someone thinks, "oh no! This is the worst situation I could ever find myself in. Everything is awful", they will feel uncomfortable, stressed and anxious.

How Self-Talk Affects Mental Health

Mental health professionals know that self-talk is present in everyone, but people with psychological disorders like depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and personality disorders have self-talk that is especially distorted and negative. These people must work exceptionally hard to recognize and adjust their self-talk.

Self-talk is a powerful force, but people may not understand its influence or how it appears. First off, it is often silent and automatic. Even if you do not notice it, self-talk is still swirling in your mind. Also, it may appear as pictures or symbols. Not everyone thinks in words, so images may represent a group of words and a range of feelings.

Unfortunately, self-talk is also a habit. Like other habits, self-talk can be positive or negative, and it takes time to properly change. We usually think the voice in our head sounds true. When you hear yourself say something, you tend to believe it, but self-talk is often irrational and illogical. Just because you think it does not make it true. Be careful not to blend opinion with facts. This can make your life better or worse. What you say and hear affects how you feel. Self-talk can drive symptoms in either direction.

People should always pay attention to their self-talk. It offers tremendous levels of information about a person's mental health state.

Where Does Self-Talk Come From?

A person's self-talk does not materialize out of thin air. Instead, it slowly develops and builds over time.

Self-talk begins to form with the words people in your life share with you. When loved ones speak to you with kindness, optimism, patience, understanding and forgiveness, you begin treating yourself the same way. When you are confronted with judgment, negativity, shame, and guilt, these tendencies bleed over into your self-talk.

Because of this, parents play a huge role in your early self-talk, but teachers, caregivers, babysitters, coaches, media and extended family members contribute significantly too. With time, the messages a person hears may become integrated and internalized into their own self-talk.

Additionally, a person's experiences can positively or negatively affect their self-talk, so someone who has endured multiple traumas will likely have a more pessimistic self-talk. Someone with safety, stability and security will have a more optimistic voice.

Self-talk is flexible, meaning it can change with the person. The way a person speaks to themselves when they are 11 can be much different than the way they speak to themselves in their 30s, 50s, or 70s.

How to Modify Self-Talk

No matter the foundation, you always have the power to shift your thinking style. Based on past experiences and messages communicated during your early life, changing the thinking patterns can prove much more challenging for some than for others.

Track Your Self-Talk

As stated, everyone has some level of negative self-talk, but some people have much more than others. Spend some time paying attention to your thoughts and the repercussions they have on your feelings and behaviors. You may feel like there are countless automatic thoughts, but they usually boil down to just a few repeated statements. Write these down.

Analyze the Words That Are Said

Once you document your self-talk, take some time to reflect on the truthfulness and accuracy of the words. You may feel like every decision is a mistake or that people are out to get you, but these beliefs are not accurate. If the self-talk makes you feel hopeless and worthless, you need to ignore it and replace it.

Find Alternatives

Negative self-talk makes you feel worse and positive self-talk makes you feel better. Choose happiness by seeking self-talk that emphasizes your strengths and downplays your weaknesses. Give yourself compliments and find characteristics to highlight.

Make Positive Self-Talk a Routine

People with poor self-talk expose themselves to countless negative thoughts throughout the day. To truly combat this negativity, a person must make positive self-talk and self-love a priority. For good results, set reminders to intentionally think with optimism and encouragement during the day.

Talk to Yourself with Kindness

Your self-talk develops over your entire life and has a lot of momentum. Changing course is a difficult task, but with consistency and patience, you can have the self-talk you deserve.