

Countering Negative Self-Talk

Adapted from Cognitive Therapy by Judith S. Beck

Negative self-talk has the power to influence both our mood and behavior. For example, if you consider the possibility of change and find yourself saying “This is too hard. I’ll never be able to do this,” you may feel sad, perhaps go on to believe that you are a failure, and give up. Our negative self-talk has a funny way of leading us to behave in a self-defeating way, thereby giving us more ammunition to put ourselves down – it can be a vicious cycle!

Consider what would have happened if you had been able to evaluate your thinking. What if you had said instead, “Wait a minute. This may be hard, but it’s not necessarily impossible. I’ve been able to do things like this before. If I keep at it, I’ll probably get it.” Would you have felt or behaved differently? Chances are your sadness would be reduced, you would have continued trying, and the likelihood of your success would have been greater.

“This is too hard. I’ll never be able to do this.”

“Wait a minute. This may be hard, but it’s not impossible.”

Automatic thoughts are rarely completely erroneous. Usually, they contain a grain of truth, and it is important to acknowledge the grain of truth if it exists. To understand how much of your automatic thought is true, you can question it:

- What is the evidence?
Is there evidence to support the idea?
Is there evidence against the idea?
- Is there an alternative explanation?
What is the *worst* that could happen? Could I live through it?
What is the *best* that could happen?
What is the *most likely* outcome?
- What is the effect of my believing the automatic thought?
What could be the effect of changing my thinking?

What now?

Once you've *evaluated* your automatic thoughts, try writing down and rehearsing positive statements which directly refute or invalidate your negative self-talk. If you've been creating upsetting emotional states through negative mental programming, you can begin to change the way you feel by substituting positive programming.

Be patient!

Doing this will take some practice. You've had years to practice your negative self-talk and naturally have developed some very strong habits. By starting to notice when you're engaging in negativity, and then countering it with positive, supportive statements to yourself, you'll begin to turn your thinking around. With practice and consistent effort, you'll change both the way you think *and feel* on an ongoing basis.

Stubborn self-talk

Perhaps after you've evaluated your automatic thoughts you find that you are still strongly attached to some of your negative self-talk -you're not someone who's easily persuaded. If that's the case, consider the *usefulness* of the thought. What are the *advantages* and *disadvantages* of continuing to have the thought? You can practice these techniques to help you develop an adaptive response to the thought.

- Using other people as a reference point
- Acting "As-If" (practice changing the behavior to reduce the intensity of the belief)
- Thought-stopping
- As an idea, it can be tested

Remember:

You can believe an idea strongly, even "feel" it to be true,
and yet have it be mostly or entirely untrue.