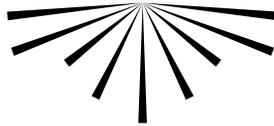


# 3

## Self-Talk



### Questions to Consider

- How often are you aware of the internal messages or thoughts going on inside your head?
- Do you pay attention to the types of thoughts you think about yourself? If so, what do they tend to be like?
- Do you find it difficult to be kind to yourself and to give yourself praise? Can you think of any positive messages you have told yourself recently?
- Do you frequently berate yourself for shortcomings, weaknesses, and failures? If so, what sort of messages do you tend to say? Can you think of recent examples?
- Are you aware of any belief systems or personal values that get in the way of happiness, success, or feeling good about yourself?
- Have you ever told yourself you are not capable before giving yourself the chance to try?

## Self-Talk

Self-talk refers to the silent messages or internal thoughts we think all day long. It is something everybody does and is not the same as “hearing voices,” which is symptomatic of hallucinations or serious disorders, such as schizophrenia. Self-talk comes from that little voice, or the internal monologue, in the back of each of our heads that constantly gives us messages, makes interpretations, and thinks numerous thoughts as we go about our various tasks throughout the day. Sometimes these messages seem very loud and clear, while other times they are very subtle, and we often do not even realize we are thinking anything at all. But we are always thinking and essentially talking to ourselves inside our heads. This self-talk voice is very powerful and plays a large role in how you feel.

### *Positive/Healthy Self-Talk Versus Negative/Unhealthy Self-Talk*

When your self-talk is positive and upbeat, you generally feel good. However, positive self-talk does not always come naturally. Instead, self-talk that is largely negative seems to be the norm for many people. This is especially true for those with depression, anxiety, or low self-esteem. Often, people with these conditions have unknowingly developed a pattern and habit of constantly engaging in negative self-talk and dysfunctional thinking.

Negative feelings, such as frustration, anger, depression, guilt, hopelessness, and fear are often caused by negative self-talk. The idea behind self-talk is that your *thoughts*, not actual events or things, create your moods and the way you feel about yourself and various experiences. In other words, the bad things that happen do not really cause us to become upset. We get upset because of the way we *think* about and interpret these events. When we feel upset about something, it is ultimately the thought “I feel bad” or “I don’t like this” that creates the feeling. We do not readily recognize the actual thoughts behind events or objects because, often, they are subconscious and we are not used to paying close attention to this internal chatter.

### *An Example*

I once backed out of a driveway and smacked right into another parked car. I immediately felt upset and terrible about myself. Since I was aware of the concept of self-talk and had become pretty good at catching destructive thinking, I was able to stop and recognize the messages going through the back of my head and realize these thoughts were not helping the situation. The thoughts included sentences like, “You idiot. You are so stupid. You should have looked in your mirror. This is terrible. Fixing the dent is going to cost a fortune. How could

you be so careless? Now you are going to have to tell the car owner what happened, and she will hate you.” I felt awful. However, the bad feelings were not actually coming from the act of me hitting another car. They were coming from the fact that I was beating myself up for it and engaging in a lot of negative thinking. Because I was in the habit of catching destructive thoughts, I was able to recognize and stop the negative messages and instead tell myself, “Okay, this stinks. But it’s not the end of the world. Everybody makes mistakes and you are going to be okay.” I immediately felt my mood lift and, by ending the self-depreciating messages, I was able to protect my self-esteem.

### *Negative Self-Talk & Low Self-Esteem*

Your internal monologue frequently involves thoughts specifically related to who you are and how you feel about yourself. When self-esteem is low, we wind up constantly sending ourselves messages about our inadequacies and our faults, and we focus on the negative experiences we face. These negative thoughts include sentences that are self-rejecting and self-depreciating, which further deplete self-esteem and cause feelings of depression. Negative self-talk and low self-esteem become a vicious cycle. The worse we feel about ourselves, the more we beat ourselves up with our thinking. And the more negative thoughts we have about ourselves, the lower our self-esteem becomes.

Everybody experiences negative self-talk to some extent. For some people, negative self-talk becomes so pervasive that it becomes impossible to feel happy or good enough. When negative self-talk is at its worst, a person may seek out various coping mechanisms to help alleviate the bad feelings and essentially block out the negative voice. These coping mechanisms can often be unhealthy or even dangerous. They can include things like excessive use of drugs and alcohol, promiscuity, self-injurious behaviors, such as cutting, or sometimes even suicide attempts. Negative self-talk is essentially a bad habit that can lead to devastating consequences, but the good news is that self-talk is something we can change. The first step involves gaining a better understanding of how negative self-talk shows up in our thinking.

### *Dysfunctional Thinking*

Two counseling theories that involve identifying faulty thinking include Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). These theories emphasize a focus on identifying, challenging, and replacing negative self-talk and dysfunctional patterns of thinking with healthier thoughts to create growth and change. They encompass the idea that faulty thinking creates negative emotions and exacerbates problems.

REBT is an action-based form of psychotherapy initially developed by Albert Ellis in the 1950s. Ellis believed that emotional disturbances were caused by flawed or irrational thinking. He taught that people are disturbed by their view of things, rather than by actual events, and he helped patients to manage their emotions and behaviors by identifying and altering irrational thinking.

Similar to REBT, CBT is another goal-oriented form of psychotherapy that looks at changing thought patterns to treat a wide range of issues. In the 1970s, Aaron Beck laid much of the groundwork for CBT and began identifying various forms of cognitive distortions. In the 1980s, his student David Burns popularized these concepts via his book *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*. Like REBT, CBT focuses on looking at and changing dysfunctional thought patterns. Beck and Burns are credited with researching and categorizing what are referred to as “cognitive distortions” or “self-defeating beliefs,” essentially attitudes that control our way of thinking and make us vulnerable to low self-esteem, negative emotions, and conflicts in relationships.

Irrational beliefs and cognitive distortions are often rigid, harsh, and very unrealistic. They set us up to feel disappointed or inadequate because they do not leave room for flexibility or other options. Engaging in thinking that is filled with self-defeating beliefs will keep you trapped in a place of low self-esteem and make it nearly impossible to feel happy, confident, and fulfilled. For an in-depth look at cognitive distortions and strategies to untwist your negative thinking, see *Ten Days to Self-Esteem* by David Burns. Below we will explore some of the common patterns of dysfunctional thinking as they relate specifically to thoughts regarding self-esteem and self-worth.

### *Irrational Beliefs*

Albert Ellis listed the following examples of common irrational beliefs that frequently begin in childhood and wind up causing problems later in adulthood if they remain part of our core belief systems:

#### Common Irrational Beliefs of Children

- I must be liked by everyone, and if I am not it is awful and I can't stand it.
- If someone calls me names, it must be true and I can't stand it.
- I should be the best at everything I do and if I'm not, I am worthless.
- Some people are bad and I have to dwell on how to get back at them.
- It is awful when things are not the way I would very much like them to be.

- My unhappiness is caused by others and I have no ability to control my unhappiness and have no ability to make myself happy.
- It is easier for me to avoid certain troubling situations than to face them.
- I cannot depend on myself—I have to depend on others for my strength.
- My past causes me to be the way I am and there is nothing I can do about it.
- There is a perfect solution to every problem and it is terrible if I cannot figure out the perfect solution.
- I must become upset and stay upset over other people's problems.
- Things should be fair, and if they are not it is awful and I can't stand it.
- I should never be uncomfortable or inconvenienced and when I am it is awful and I can't stand it.
- I can achieve and be successful even if I do nothing and have no plan of action.
- It is my fault if my parents fight (drink, are getting divorced).
- Because I am adopted (in foster care, have less money), I am less than other kids are.
- Because he/she did that to me (mean action; physical, sexual, emotional abuse), there is something wrong with me and I don't deserve to be happy.
- If I love my stepdad (stepmom), it means I don't love my dad (mom).

These irrational beliefs often begin in childhood but continue on into adulthood to form the basis of the messages incorporated into people's negative self-talk and dysfunctional thought patterns. Irrational beliefs may not show up as actual sentences you say out loud or establish in a concrete form. Instead, they are subconscious beliefs or attitudes that you hold somewhere in the back of your mind. When you do or experience something that goes against one of these self-defeating beliefs, you are unable to justify or make sense of the experience. Thus, you wind up feeling upset, disappointed, or somehow inadequate.

As you become more aware of your own feelings and self-talk, you will be better able to recognize various forms of dysfunctional thinking and can work to change irrational thoughts into statements that are more supportive of a healthy and rational outlook on life. Consider the first example: "I must be liked by

everyone, and if I am not it is awful and I can't stand it." Yes, it would be nice to always be liked by everyone. But let's face it: That just is not realistic. There are always going to be people who, for whatever reason, may not like you. If you hold on to a belief that makes being disliked unbearable, you will inevitably face feelings of frustration and inadequacy at some point or another.

Another example of an irrational belief that many people hold is that it is wrong to feel or show negative emotions. Some people grow up in families where they receive the message that showing emotions is weak or unacceptable; thus, they feel guilty and inadequate when experiencing various emotions. This view that emotions are off-limits is faulty because it is irrational to expect that you will never experience or display negative emotions. Everyone encounters situations and experiences that are out of our control, which can lead to feelings of sadness, anger, fear, or being overwhelmed. Sometimes we simply are unable to control or hide these emotions in the moment. By telling yourself that you should never experience or show negative emotions, you basically set yourself up for failure because that is just not possible. Experiencing emotions is not a choice, but what we do with them or how we express them is.

If you can learn to instead incorporate more rational, realistic thoughts into your belief system, such as "Even though I am a good person, there are bound to be some people who don't like me for reasons out of my control" and "Experiencing a range of emotions is a normal part of life," then you become less hard on yourself. You leave room for the inevitable times when things will be less than perfect or ideal. By thinking more rationally, you cut yourself some slack and avoid the pitfall of beating yourself up with destructive negative self-talk messages that imply you are a failure or a terrible person if you are not liked or if you get angry.

In *Feeling Better, Getting Better, Staying Better: Profound Self-Help Therapy for Your Emotions*, Albert Ellis says that irrational beliefs fall under the following three categories:

- I *absolutely must* perform well!
- I *absolutely must* be treated fairly by others!
- I *must not* find life's conditions very hard!\*

These rigid beliefs do not leave room for error or other options, thus they set the stage for a letdown. Because they are unrealistic and not entirely possible, they tend to lead to failure, frustration, and disappointment. Since the beliefs are about personal standards, the inability to meet them negatively impacts feelings of self-worth and lowers self-esteem.

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## *Distorted Thinking*

Below are examples of common forms of dysfunctional thinking. Like irrational beliefs, these ways of thinking often become habitual patterns that are very engrained in people's subconscious thinking. Nearly everyone has engaged in distorted thinking in one way or another. When dysfunctional thinking becomes a habit or norm in thinking, it can be very difficult to recognize the distortions, yet they have a tremendous impact on how we feel and approach various endeavors. When your thinking includes irrational beliefs and dysfunctional distortions, you become prone to negative self-talk and problems like low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.

**Black-and-white, all-or-nothing, or polarized thinking** occurs when you look at things in black-or-white terms. In regard to self-esteem, when you engage in this type of thinking you tend to evaluate your personal qualities in extremes. When you make a mistake or do not do as well as you wanted, you see yourself as being totally worthless, terrible, a loser, etc. You may think that the only way to be a worthwhile person is to do things perfectly. This is distorted thinking because no one is all bad or all good and it is impossible to be perfect all the time. Everyone has both good qualities and flaws and weaknesses. Examples of all-or-nothing thinking include sentences like, "I fail at everything I do," "I don't enjoy anything," "I am completely incompetent," or "Nothing ever works out for me." Words that convey extremes, such as *always*, *never*, *every*, *all*, and *none*, are used.

**Magnification**, also called **catastrophizing**, is frequently used by people with low self-esteem. Every mistake, failure, or perceived problem tends to be blown out of proportion and dwelled upon for long periods of time. It becomes difficult to cut yourself slack or forgive yourself for even very minor things. For example, you may beat yourself up for something you thought you did wrong or something stupid you thought you said, thus making yourself feel even worse and further depleting your self-esteem. You may also overemphasize the importance of an event; for example, you may think something like, "Since I didn't do so well on that project, this must be the wrong field for me. Maybe I should give up."

**Minimization** is the opposite of magnification and occurs when you underemphasize or devalue something positive that happens. For example, if somebody does something nice for you, you assume they are just doing it because they feel they have to, not because they really care about you or believe you are worthy. When you do have successes, you downplay their importance. You may tell yourself something like, "Yeah, I may have won second place, but I didn't come in first."

**Tunnel vision or overgeneralization** happens when you see only what fits in your frame of mind and ignore the rest. If you make a mistake or have

trouble doing something as well as you would like, you then predict that you will *never* be able to do well and will *always* make the same mistake. Examples would be, “Because I didn’t make the varsity team, I should just give up playing soccer. I’ll never be good enough,” or “Since I failed this time, I should just give up completely because I will never do it right.”

**Negative focus**, sometimes also referred to as **negative mental filter** or **dwelling on the negatives**, happens when you concentrate on mistakes, things that did not go well, or negative aspects of yourself, while failing to recognize positive aspects and accomplishments. You tend to magnify negative things and minimize positives about yourself. For example, you think, “I only got a 75 percent on the test. I am terrible at math.” You ignore the fact that you may have tried your best and that, even though you did not get a perfect score, you still got more answers right than wrong.

**Discounting or rejecting the positives** happens when you *ignore* positive qualities in yourself altogether or dismiss them completely. When someone says something good about you, you overlook or deflect the compliment. You may often find yourself saying “Yeah, but...” For example, “Yeah, I did well, but that was only because it was easy,” or “It doesn’t count that I did well because anyone could do that.”

**Assuming, jumping to conclusions, or arbitrary inference** occurs when a person makes an unfounded judgment or assumes the worst as his/her default. It often shows up in **mind reading**, when you assume others disapprove of or negatively judge you without valid reason. This is often based on a negative view of yourself and your irrational interpretations, rather than on what others are actually thinking. For example, if you feel bad about yourself you may assume things like, “He thinks I’m a loser” or “She doesn’t like me.” Jumping to conclusions and discounting the positives sometimes occurs at the same time as when you deflect compliments. For example, “He told me I look nice but he probably just said that to get me on his good side.”

**Predicting the future** is another form of jumping to conclusions that is based in always assuming the worst. Somebody who engages in this form of distorted thinking tends to have a pessimistic, “glass-half-empty” view of the world or of himself/herself. When this negative view is internalized and pointed toward oneself, it is impossible to have healthy self-esteem because self-confidence is constantly destroyed. Part of the danger in engaging in this type of thinking is that it can end up creating self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, if you go into a situation thinking, “I will fail,” chances are you will not do as well as if you had given yourself an optimistic pep talk and instead said something like, “I will do just fine” or “I am going to try my best.”

**Subjective reasoning or emotional reasoning** happens when you make feelings facts. You believe your own negative feelings in a situation are proof that

you are inadequate. For example, if you feel like a loser in a given instance, you assume it must be a fact that you are a loser in general.

**Name-calling** or **labeling** is something people do when they haphazardly call themselves names like “stupid” or “dummy.” Remember my own personal example of backing into another car: My immediate thought was, “You idiot.” When you give yourself a negative label or call yourself a mean name, you are disrespecting yourself and, thus, reinforcing low self-esteem.

**Personalization** or **blame** happens when you assume too much responsibility for a negative event. You incorrectly decide that what happened was your fault or reflects your inadequacy, even when there is no basis for doing so. You fail to see others as capable of flaws or personal deficits and instead believe any issues or conflicts must be your fault. If you actually do hold some responsibility, you magnify your role in the conflict and beat yourself up with self-depreciating thoughts.

**Should statements** include messages that begin with things like, “I should,” “I should not,” “I must,” “I cannot,” “I need,” etc. These types of messages can be formed either consciously as a directive (“I should go to the store today”) or subconsciously as part of your belief system (“I should be perfect”). Should statements are harmful because they are often rigid and unrealistic. They can create feelings of anger, guilt, frustration, and resentment because, realistically, we cannot always meet the strict expectations and criteria that lay behind the “should.”

### *More on Should Statements*

Albert Ellis, known for his blunt and controversial language, referred to the act of fixating on maladaptive sentences that begin with words like *should*, *ought*, *must*, and *have to* as “musterbation” and warned his patients not to “should all over themselves.” He demonstrated how thinking in ways that include absolutes and demands set us up for frustration, failure, and disappointment.

Examples of common should statements include sentences like:

- I should be more patient and kind.
- I must not put my own needs first.
- I have to keep the peace.
- I need to protect other people’s feelings.
- I should never make mistakes.
- I must be respectful of others even when they don’t respect me.
- I have to be perfect.
- I need to accomplish x, y, and z.
- I should not rock the boat.

The problem with these statements is that they are too strict and inflexible. They do not leave room for mistakes or imperfections, which are part of life. Changing should statements into less rigid sentences can ultimately help to prevent or decrease negative feelings, such as disappointment and frustration, and can help protect self-esteem by avoiding the pitfall that is inevitable when you continuously set yourself up for failure. By simply using slightly different language, you allow for more flexibility and establish standards and expectations that are less severe and more reasonable. Changing just one or two words can have a huge effect in terms of creating conditions that are more realistic, forgiving, and protective of self-esteem.

Examples of should substitutes:

- I should.....I could
- I must.....I'd like to
- I have to.....I choose to
- I need to.....I want to

For example, the statement or thought, "I should do all my chores today" is very rigid and too likely to become problematic. If you listed ALL of the chores you hope to accomplish and tell yourself you *should* do them all, you may feel very overwhelmed at the thought of having to do so much. Additionally, you may experience a sense of resistance regarding feeling obligated. This statement creates anxiety up front and does not leave room for things to go wrong. It sets you up to feel discouraged, frustrated, and angry with yourself if you are unable to do everything you had planned.

Self-talk that includes "should" statements puts you at risk for more self-talk that contains "I failed" messages later. When you do not accomplish something behind a "should," that negative self-talk creeps in, responding to the should statement by saying things like, "You didn't do what you were supposed to. You are a failure. You are irresponsible. You can't manage your time well." It is highly likely that something may come up that takes time out of your day and you might not get everything on your to-do list accomplished. Regardless of the reason, if you are unable to accomplish everything after telling yourself, "I should," you will inevitably feel bad and likely will be upset with yourself in the end.

You wind up feeling bad about *yourself* for not accomplishing what you had told yourself you *should* do. The focus shifts from being about the list of chores to instead being about how you are a failure. This is bad for your mood and ultimately for your self-esteem.

By changing this should statement up front to something less rigid, such as, "I would like to get all of my chores done today," you allow yourself more flexibility. If you do not get to everything, you may still feel disappointed, but you do not feel bad about *yourself* for not accomplishing everything. Instead of

beating yourself up, your self-talk will likely be more rational, saying things such as, “I wish I got more things accomplished today.” This type of self-talk is not berating or belittling, thus you protect yourself from damaged self-esteem and overwhelmingly negative feelings.

### *Mistaken Beliefs*

In *The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook* (4<sup>th</sup> edition), Dr. Edmund J. Bourne uses the terminology *mistaken beliefs* to encompass the problematic beliefs and assumptions we make about ourselves, others, and life in general. He provides the following questionnaire to help individuals identify the types of faulty thinking they engage in. Fill out the following questions to help gauge whether you hold any mistaken beliefs in your personal belief system.

## Mistaken Beliefs Questionnaire\*

How much does each of these unconstructive beliefs influence your feelings and behavior? Take your time to reflect about each belief.

- 1 = Not so much
- 2 = Somewhat / sometimes
- 3 = Strongly / frequently
- 4 = Very strongly

Place the appropriate number after each statement.

- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| 1.) I feel powerless or helpless.                                 | _____ |
| 2.) Often I feel like a victim of outside circumstances.          | _____ |
| 3.) I don't have the money to do what I really want.              | _____ |
| 4.) There is seldom enough time to do what I want.                | _____ |
| 5.) Life is very difficult—It's a struggle.                       | _____ |
| 6.) If things are going well, watch out!                          | _____ |
| 7.) I feel unworthy. I feel that I'm not good enough.             | _____ |
| 8.) Often I feel that I don't deserve to be happy or successful.  | _____ |
| 9.) Often I feel a sense of defeat and resignation: “Why bother?” | _____ |
| 10.) My condition seems hopeless.                                 | _____ |
| 11.) There is something fundamentally wrong with me.              | _____ |
| 12.) I feel ashamed of my condition.                              | _____ |
| 13.) If I take risks to get better, I'm afraid I'll fail.         | _____ |

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- 14.) If I take risks to get better, I'm afraid I'll succeed. \_\_\_\_\_
- 15.) If I felt better, I might have to deal with realities I'd rather not face. \_\_\_\_\_
- 16.) I feel like I'm nothing (or can't make it) unless I'm loved. \_\_\_\_\_
- 17.) I can't stand being separated from others. \_\_\_\_\_
- 18.) If a person doesn't love me in return, I feel like it's my fault. \_\_\_\_\_
- 19.) It's very hard to be alone. \_\_\_\_\_
- 20.) What others think of me is very important. \_\_\_\_\_
- 21.) I feel personally threatened when criticized. \_\_\_\_\_
- 22.) It's important to please others. \_\_\_\_\_
- 23.) People won't like me if they see who I really am. \_\_\_\_\_
- 24.) I need to keep up a front or others will see my weaknesses. \_\_\_\_\_
- 25.) I have to achieve or produce something significant to feel okay about myself. \_\_\_\_\_
- 26.) My accomplishments at work/school are extremely important. \_\_\_\_\_
- 27.) Success is everything. \_\_\_\_\_
- 28.) I have to be the best at what I do. \_\_\_\_\_
- 29.) I have to be somebody—somebody outstanding. \_\_\_\_\_
- 30.) To fail is terrible. \_\_\_\_\_
- 31.) I can't rely on others for help. \_\_\_\_\_
- 32.) I can't receive from others. \_\_\_\_\_
- 33.) If I let someone get too close, I'm afraid of being controlled. \_\_\_\_\_
- 34.) I can't tolerate being out of control. \_\_\_\_\_
- 35.) I'm the only one who can solve my problems. \_\_\_\_\_
- 36.) I should always be very generous and unselfish. \_\_\_\_\_
- 37.) I should always be the perfect:
  - a. Employee \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Professional \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Spouse \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Parent \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. Lover \_\_\_\_\_
  - f. Friend \_\_\_\_\_
  - g. Student \_\_\_\_\_
  - h. Son/Daughter \_\_\_\_\_
- 38.) I should be able to endure any hardship. \_\_\_\_\_
- 39.) I should be able to find a quick solution to every problem. \_\_\_\_\_
- 40.) I should never be tired or fatigued. \_\_\_\_\_
- 41.) I should always be efficient. \_\_\_\_\_
- 42.) I should always be competent. \_\_\_\_\_
- 43.) I should always be able to foresee everything. \_\_\_\_\_
- 44.) I should never be angry or irritable. \_\_\_\_\_
- 45.) I should always be pleasant or nice no matter how I feel. \_\_\_\_\_
- 46.) I often feel:
  - a. Ugly \_\_\_\_\_

- b. Inferior or defective \_\_\_\_\_
- c. Unintelligent \_\_\_\_\_
- d. Guilty or ashamed \_\_\_\_\_
- 47.) I'm just the way I am—I can't really change. \_\_\_\_\_
- 48.) The world outside is a dangerous place. \_\_\_\_\_
- 49.) Unless you worry about a problem it just gets worse. \_\_\_\_\_
- 50.) It's risky to trust people. \_\_\_\_\_
- 51.) My problems will go away on their own with time. \_\_\_\_\_
- 52.) I feel anxious about making mistakes. \_\_\_\_\_
- 53.) I demand perfection of myself. \_\_\_\_\_
- 54.) If I didn't have my safe person (or safe place), I'm afraid I couldn't cope. \_\_\_\_\_
- 55.) If I stop worrying, I'm afraid something bad will happen. \_\_\_\_\_
- 56.) I'm afraid to face the world out there on my own. \_\_\_\_\_
- 57.) My self-worth isn't a given—it has to be earned. \_\_\_\_\_

*Mistaken Beliefs Questionnaire Scoring\**

You may have noticed that some of the beliefs on the questionnaire fall into specific groups, each of which reflects a very basic belief or attitude toward life. (The idea for defining subgroups of beliefs was adapted from David Burns's work.) Go back over your answers and see how you scored with respect to each of the groups of beliefs listed below.

Add your scores for each of the following subgroups of beliefs. If your total score on the items in a particular subgroup exceeds the criterion value, then this is likely to be a problem area for you. It's important that you give this subgroup special attention when you begin to work with affirmations to start changing your mistaken beliefs.

- 1.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 2.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 7.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 9.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 10.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 11.) \_\_\_\_\_

If your total score is over 15: You likely believe that you are powerless, have little or no control over outside circumstances, or are unable to do much that could help your situation. In sum, "I'm powerless" or "I can't do much about my life."

TOTAL:

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\* The idea for defining subgroups of beliefs was adapted from David Burns, M.D., *Feeling Good*. See his book for further details on how to counter and work with mistaken beliefs.

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- 16.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 17.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 18.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 19.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 54.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 56.) \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL:

If your total score is over 15: You likely believe that your self-worth is dependent on the love of someone else. You feel that you need another's (or others') love to feel okay about yourself and to cope. In sum, "My worth and security are dependent on being loved."

- 20.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 21.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 22.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 23.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 24.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 45.) \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL:

If your total score is over 15: You likely believe that your self-worth is dependent on others' approval. Being pleasing and getting acceptance from others is very important for your sense of security and your sense of who you are. In sum, "My worth and security depend on the approval of others."

- 25.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 26.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 27.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 28.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 29.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 30.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 41.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 42.) \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL:

If your total score is over 20: You likely believe that your self-worth is dependent on external achievements, such as school or career performance, status, or wealth. In sum, "My worth is dependent on my performance or achievements."

- 31.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 32.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 33.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 34.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 35.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 50.) \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL:

If your score is over 15: You likely believe that you can't trust, rely on, or receive help from others. You may have a tendency to keep a distance from people and avoid intimacy for fear of losing control. In sum, "If I trust or get too close, I'll lose control."

- 37.) \_\_\_\_\_  
 38.) \_\_\_\_\_  
 39.) \_\_\_\_\_  
 40.) \_\_\_\_\_  
 52.) \_\_\_\_\_  
 53.) \_\_\_\_\_

If your score is over 25: You likely believe that you have to be perfect in some or many areas of life. You make excessive demands on yourself. There is no room for mistakes. In sum, "I have to be perfect" or "It's not okay to make mistakes."

TOTAL:

### *Self-Talk Up Close & Personal*

A client of mine was struggling with such bad negative self-talk that it was creating a multitude of problems, including anxiety, depression, self-injury, and suicidal ideation. Using poetry to express her feelings and struggles, she wrote the following poem to explain the thinking that goes on inside her head. I feel very humbled that she shared this vulnerable part of herself with me and I was blown away by what a great job she did in terms of putting her struggles into words.

The poem is sad and intense because it shows how painful her feelings had become; however it provides such a powerful example of how simple yet pervasive and destructive self-talk messages can be. This client is a great person. She is kind, talented, creative, smart, pretty, and an absolute joy to know. It is obvious that her friends and family adore her and that they are loving and supportive. Unfortunately, she developed a pattern of negative self-talk early on and, over time, it has created low self-esteem and the inability to see herself in the positive light others do. She is a perfect example of how struggles with negative self-talk can happen to anyone and can wreak havoc on an otherwise normal, healthy, happy life.

I am very grateful to my client for granting me permission to share her poem. Please note that the poem contains language that some may find inappropriate or offensive. My client and I discussed whether she should change the language before giving a copy to me, however I think it is important to convey how incredibly strong the feelings of frustration and anger can become after years of negative self-talk.

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## Buried Alive

I have anxiety.  
Now most people think it means I'm crazy or get startled easily.  
That is not quite true...  
It's more of a crazy that's inside of you.  
And for me it's a whirlwind of thoughts in my brain  
And if people could hear them they would think I'm insane.  
These thoughts shouldn't be here.  
I would give anything for my head just to be clear.  
At least then I would be free of my messed-up anxiety.  
Oh well, that's just how I function.  
Having a brain that overanalyzes so my head is a fucked-up junction.  
Pointless thoughts spinning around, slowly burying me into the ground.

I'll give you an example so you can see just how fucked-up my brain can be.  
I'm walking down the hall and say hi to a person I know,  
we then pass each other and continue to go.  
A simple interaction you think? Ha-ha...NO.  
Most people wouldn't even think twice about it, because it's a meaningless thing,  
but my brain seems to doubt it  
Here is how my brain works: Should I have said hi instead of hey?  
Goddamnit, hi is super gay!  
Should I have stopped and talked to them? I doubt I'm even their friend.  
They probably think I'm weird as hell!  
They probably hate me...but I hate me, too, so oh well.  
I'm so fucking stupid, I'm so fucking dumb,  
how can I not handle a simple situation.

As you can see my thought patterns escalate quite quickly.  
Every interaction I have is like I'm in a grave slowly being buried alive,  
by the words that haunt me on the inside.  
They're all shovels filled with dirt, slowly burying me with my hurt.  
I have no way to escape or survive...All I can do is be buried alive.

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While this poem is dark and conveys deep hurt, I love that it is so real. It demonstrates the agonizing that can go on in somebody's head over something as simple as saying "hi" versus "hey." For people with low self-esteem and negative self-talk, this constant analysis and second-guessing of personal actions makes up the continuous chatter that generates problems and creates barriers to happiness and healthy self-esteem. Realistically, most likely nobody else even notices or gives a second thought to the word choice we use when saying hello, yet our own negative self-talk voice convinces us we are wrong or inadequate. In this poem, you can see how name-calling, mind reading, and making interpretations play out and create self-deprecation and pain.

From the outside looking in, it is easy to see how unnecessary this self-berating is; however when your self-esteem is low and you are stuck in the habit of beating yourself up mentally, it can be incredibly difficult to recognize the problem and make changes. You begin to feel completely unworthy and hold yourself to different standards than you do the rest of the world. You do not feel deserving of self-acceptance or kind words from yourself. Nevertheless, with awareness, effort, determination, and practice, it is possible to shift the way you treat yourself and build self-esteem.

### *Ending the Habit of Negative Self-Talk*

When you learn to recognize negative self-talk and become more aware of your internal thought processes, you can work to change the way you think on a regular basis. By stopping dysfunctional thinking, you can change the overall way you feel. Learning to stop the negative voice is a healthy coping mechanism and a tool we can all benefit from. The ultimate goal is to end the negative messages and instead incorporate healthy, positive self-talk statements into your thinking—a practice that will improve your self-esteem and help you to feel better.

In *Rewire Your Brain: Think Your Way to a Better Life*, John B. Arden, Ph.D., talks about neuroplasticity and describes how the brain is constantly changing and being modified by experiences throughout your life. He says that new brain cells can be born and states, "repetition rewires the brain and breeds habit." Dr. Arden describes a process for rewiring the brain by unlearning old habits and creating new ones using the acronym FEED\*, which stands for Focus, Effort, Effortlessness, and Determination.

**Focus** involves paying attention to the new behavior you want to learn or the situation you want to change. In regard to self-talk, this means you begin to notice the various messages in your internal dialogue and consider how these messages can be more self-serving rather than self-destructive.

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\* Adapted from John B. Arden, Ph.D.'s 2010 *Rewire Your Brain: Think Your Way to a Better Life*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Used with permission.

The **effort** involved in focusing activates your brain to establish new synaptic connections, helping you to learn new things. With practice, which takes **effort**, the new behavior, thought, or feeling becomes established and ultimately takes less energy to keep going. The new behavior eventually becomes **effortless**.

Regarding self-talk, the more and more you practice catching and changing negative self-talk messages, the easier it will become. Eventually, your overall way of thinking and talking to yourself will shift and positive self-talk will become more of the norm.

**Determination** is essential in putting forth the effort involved in working to change the behavior and keep up with the new way of thinking. Although it takes some hard work and a dedicated effort to focus, practice, and stay determined, you *can* ultimately conquer negative self-talk, rewire the brain, and change your whole outlook on yourself, thus creating a foundation of healthy self-esteem.

It is not always easy to change self-talk because chances are you have been engaging in negative self-talk for a very long time. Most of us know that bad habits are generally hard to break. But with patience and practice, it's possible. Chapter five provides more help on changing negative self-talk messages into rational statements that will ultimately begin forming a new pattern of healthy thinking.

## Recommended Journaling



### Self-Talk

Complete the Mistaken Beliefs Questionnaire. This will help you to identify areas where you may engage in distorted thinking, which ultimately impacts your sense of self. Which questions do you very strongly agree with? Do you see any pattern among the questions you scored with a four? Are you able to see how these statements involve negative self-talk and irrational beliefs?

Over the course of the next few weeks, begin to pay attention to the voice in the back of your mind and try to figure out what thoughts you are thinking throughout the day. Are you able to identify times when you engage in negative self-talk? It may be helpful to jot some of these thoughts down in your journal. You may begin to see a pattern in your thinking and may be able to identify certain areas that trip you up the most. Pay special attention to your self-talk during times when you feel negative emotions—angry, upset, hurt, frustrated. What thoughts may be behind these emotions? Try to formulate the thoughts into sentences, then work to identify and dispute any irrational thinking.

If you catch yourself engaging in irrational thinking or resonate with any of the irrational beliefs or forms of dysfunctional thinking listed in the examples, consider where these ideas come from. Think about what the pros and cons are of changing these beliefs to include more rational ways of looking at things.

Remember that negative self-talk is often a long-term, deep-seated habit and a familiar pattern of thinking. It will likely be challenging at first to catch your negative self-talk and pinpoint your irrational beliefs. Give yourself credit for the times you are aware that you are engaging in distorted thinking rather than beating yourself up for doing so. With time and practice, it will become easier to identify, and eventually to prevent or alter, toxic thinking.