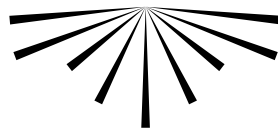




Thought-Stopping & Replacing Negative Self-Talk



Questions to Consider

- Have you ever tried to block out negative thoughts you have had about yourself?
- If so, did you find it difficult to do?
- What gets in the way of stopping or shutting out the negative voice inside your head?
- Have you ever considered that talking more kindly to yourself could have a dramatic impact on how you feel? Have you tried it? If so, what happened?

Thought-Stopping & Replacing Negative Self-Talk

Now that we've defined negative self-talk and identified the various ways it can show up, let's talk about how we can begin to break the habit of engaging in these destructive ways of thinking. The first step in changing unhealthy thinking involves developing awareness. You've gained a better understanding of the different types of negative thinking and already have a greater awareness of how harmful these messages can be. When you gain an understanding of how negative self-talk messages can show up and affect you through your everyday thought processes, you naturally become more aware of what's going on inside your head. This awareness alone lays the foundation for change. Moving forward, you will likely be more cognizant of times you are engaging in negative self-talk. It will also be important to actively start monitoring your daily thinking and to begin using a tool called *Thought-Stopping*.

Thought-stopping is a technique used to help catch the negative messages and distorted thoughts going through our minds. As you begin to catch these negative messages, you can work to change them into more positive, self-nurturing messages. Changing the way you think can ultimately change the way you feel and can improve your self-esteem.

Thought-Stopping Step One: Identifying the Thought

The first step in changing the way you think is to monitor your current thoughts and identify any negative messages. Throughout your day, become really aware of what you are thinking at any given moment. When something happens, pay attention to the messages or thoughts that go through your head. This can be challenging at first, because we are so used to going about our day without really stopping to consider what thoughts are racing through our minds. Make an effort to really notice what you are thinking.

Often, it is helpful to start with a feeling. For example, if you notice you are feeling upset, then stop and consider what you are thinking. There is always a thought behind a feeling. If you notice you are angry, stop and really think about the thought behind the anger. For some people, the first sign may be a physical sensation, such as an upset stomach or tension in certain muscles. As you learn to identify thoughts as they relate to feelings or physical sensations, you will likely notice a pattern. Over time, it will become easier to catch this negative thinking as soon as it occurs.

When you do recognize that you are engaging in negative self-talk, try to formulate the thought into a sentence. At first, it may be helpful to write down some of the statements or sentences that form the underlying thoughts. Doing so

will help you to see the actual thought more clearly and will make it easier to identify any self-defeating or irrational thoughts that creep into your self-talk.

As you start to identify your thoughts and pick apart your thinking, you will likely realize that many of the thoughts include negative self-talk, distorted thinking, and self-defeating beliefs. It is important to stop these thoughts right in their tracks. A participant in one of my workshops offered a great visual aid to conceptualize this: She referred to catching negative thoughts as “pulling mind-weeds.” If you are a visual person, it may help to imagine yourself plucking the negative messages from your mind one by one. Other visuals that can be helpful include imagining a big red stop sign, a giant X, or a slamming door.

Some people find it helpful to also use something tangible to help emphasize times when they discover they are thinking negatively. For example, many people advocate wearing a rubber band around your wrist and snapping it each time you catch yourself engaging in negative self-talk. Others find it helpful (and less painful!) to say “STOP” out loud or to clap in front of their face when they notice they are using negative self-talk.

As you begin to practice identifying negative self-talk, try various tools to help you fine-tune the process and determine what is most helpful for you. Expect it to be challenging at first and be patient with yourself. The more you practice thought-stopping, the easier it will become.

Thought-Stopping Step Two: Replace the Thought

Once you’ve become able to identify dysfunctional thoughts, the next step is to begin replacing them with sentences that are less harsh and more positive and realistic. For example, if you catch yourself thinking, “I’m a loser,” recognize that you are labeling yourself and then change the thought to something less severe; for example, “I made a mistake, but that doesn’t mean I’m a bad person.” If you catch yourself thinking, “Everybody at work thinks I’m stupid and worthless,” change this to something more rational, such as, “Everybody at work doesn’t have to like me. I know that I am competent at my job.” The goal is to lessen self-disparaging thoughts by replacing them with sentences that are kinder, more accepting, and more in line with healthy self-talk.

Healthy / Positive / Rational Self-Talk

Healthy self-talk includes messages that are positive (or at least neutral), rational, realistic, and supportive, rather than self-deprecating. Sentences used to counter negative self-talk do not need to be over the top or the complete opposite of the negative thought. They don’t need to be glowing, exaggerated, or overly positive. They just need to be rational and not rejecting. For example, if

the negative thought is, “I’m stupid,” the rational thought does not need to be “I’m the smartest person ever,” or even “I am smart.” It can be something neutral like, “I’m not great at math, but there are a lot of other things I’m good at,” “Everyone makes mistakes,” or simply, “I am okay.”

Stopping the negative voice and instead inserting a positive, neutral, or rational statement helps prevent you from slipping into a downward spiral that includes self-bashing, damaged self-esteem, and feelings of depression and anxiety. At first, working to change self-talk from unhealthy to healthy may be difficult but, with practice, it will become easier. Since thinking of rational counterstatements may be difficult on the spot or while being flooded with negative emotions, it may be helpful to have a few key phrases memorized that you can recite when necessary. My favorite is simply “I’m okay,” since it is useful in most any situation.

In *Therapist’s Guide to Clinical Intervention: The 1-2-3’s of Treatment Planning* (2nd edition), Sharon Johnson provides the following examples of rational/positive self-talk messages that may be useful in countering negative thinking:

Realistic Self-Talk*

- This too shall pass and my life will be better.
- I am a worthy and good person.
- I am doing the best I can, given my history and level of current awareness.
- Like everyone else, I am a fallible person and at times will make mistakes and learn from them.
- What is, is.
- Look at how much I have accomplished, and I am still progressing.
- There are no failures, only different degrees of success.
- Be honest and true to myself.
- It is okay to let myself be distressed for a while.
- I am not helpless. I can and will take the steps needed to get through this crisis.
- I will remain engaged and involved instead of isolating and withdrawing during this situation.
- This is an opportunity, instead of a threat. I will use this experience to learn something new, to change my direction, or to try a new approach.
- One step at a time.
- I can stay calm when talking to difficult people.
- I know I will be okay no matter what happens.

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- He/She is responsible for their reaction to me.
- This difficult/painful situation will soon be over.
- I can stand anything for a while.
- In the long run, who will remember, or care?
- Is this really important enough to become upset about?
- I don't really need to prove myself in this situation.
- Other people's opinions are just their opinions.
- Others are not perfect, and I won't put pressure on myself by expecting them to be.
- I cannot control the behaviors of others, I can only control my own behaviors.
- I am not responsible to make other people okay.
- I will respond appropriately, and not be reactive.
- I feel better when I don't make assumptions about the thought or behaviors of others.
- I will enjoy myself, even when life is hard.
- I will enjoy myself while catching up on all I want to accomplish.
- Don't sweat the small stuff—it's all small stuff.
- My past does not control my future.
- I choose to be a happy person.
- I am respectful to others and deserve to be respected in return.
- There is less stress in being optimistic and choosing to be in control.
- I am willing to do whatever is necessary to make tomorrow better.

Using healthy self-talk is really about nurturing yourself. Think about the way you would treat a young child or a close friend, then make an effort to treat yourself the same way. Think about it—most of us would never talk to a child or a friend the way we talk to ourselves. So why don't we treat ourselves with the same respect we give to others? The one person you spend 100 percent of your time with is you, so make an effort to start treating yourself in a kinder manner. Stop when you catch yourself engaging in negative or distorted self-talk. Instead, give yourself positive, loving, and encouraging messages. Doing so is like holding up a shield or creating a protective wall against negative self-talk.

If you find talking to yourself in a loving way to be difficult, it may be useful to think about what you would say to a close friend if you heard him/her engaging in negative self-talk. Or it may be helpful to imagine that the person delivering the positive message is someone outside of yourself—a friend, mentor, or a loved one. Sometimes paying attention to self-talk and countering negative messages feels like the old cartoons that depict the devil on one shoulder and the angel on the other. It may feel a little ridiculous to talk to yourself from two different perspectives, but eventually, with practice, the good voice will overpower the negative one and will form your new norm of thinking.

A visual image that helps me conceptualize the ideas of self-esteem, self-talk, and damaging versus healthy messages, also borrowed from Ed Jacobs's *Creative Counseling Techniques*, is this: Imagine that a Styrofoam cup is your "Self-Esteem Cup." Each time you think a negative or distorted thought, it's like poking a hole in the cup. Your self-esteem begins to leak out. The more negative messages, the more holes, and the lower your self-esteem becomes. Positive self-talk statements serve to plug up and repair the holes, allowing you to hold on to and maintain your self-esteem. At first it will take a lot of positive messages to repair the damage and refill the holes that have been created from years of self-bashing. But remember that repetition rewires the brain and creates new habits. With time and practice, positive self-talk will become easier and will be more the norm, thus you won't have to work so hard to fix the damage created by negative self-talk messages. Thinking rationally will become more natural and will allow you to preserve your self-esteem.

Thought-Stopping Step Three: Praise Yourself!

The third step in thought-stopping involves praising yourself! Changing the pattern of negative thinking is difficult and it takes a lot of practice. Each time you are able to recognize negative self-talk and then change it to something more positive, you are taking a step toward changing your overall pattern of thinking. You are ultimately working to improve the way you feel and to increase your self-esteem. Praise yourself when you are able to recognize and stop a negative thought, and praise yourself again when you are able to change this thought into something more positive and rational. By giving yourself praise, you are beginning to create a healthy habit of positive and encouraging self-talk.

Thought-Changing Log

When you are first starting to practice thought-stopping and thought-changing, it may be useful to write the thoughts down. Putting thoughts down on paper helps you to hone in on the specific sentences that form negative thoughts and allows you to identify patterns in negative thinking. Writing down the rational response can help to give the new thought more power, especially if you read this new sentence on a regular basis.

Utilizing a chart, such as the one on the next page, can help you to track your negative thoughts, create rational responses, and pinpoint the outcomes as you begin monitoring your self-talk. Remember, it's often easier to catch negative thinking when you first start by identifying a negative emotion, such as anger, fear, or embarrassment.

Recommended Journaling



Thought-Stopping & Replacing Negative Self-Talk

As you become more skilled at catching negative self-talk, take things a step further by utilizing the “Thought-Changing Log” to track and reframe your unhealthy thoughts into something more neutral. Throughout the course of the next week, pay attention to times when you experience a negative emotion. Stop and identify your specific thoughts. Formulate them into sentences and notice what type of dysfunctional or unhealthy thinking is occurring. Write the thoughts down, consider where they come from, then work to dispute them with responses that are rational and nonjudgmental.

In your journal, write about how the thought-changing log works for you. Is it helpful? What did you find challenging? What successes are you experiencing with thought-stopping and thought-changing? Do you see any patterns or specific categories of distorted thinking occurring? Were you able to change any irrational beliefs or unhealthy statements into more positive ones? If so, what was the result? If not, what do you think stands in your way? Are there certain thoughts that are harder to dispute than others? Do you get caught up in berating yourself through “yeah but” responses during your attempts to think rationally? If so, make an attempt to cut yourself more slack. Overall, do you notice a greater awareness in terms of monitoring self-talk? If so, give yourself credit for taking the first step toward changing an old, destructive habit.