

## Self-Talk & Self-Esteem

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One of the most important tools in developing and maintaining healthy self-esteem and an overall sense of happiness in our lives involves monitoring the messages we tell ourselves. All day long, you have messages, called *self-talk*, going through your head.

For many people, these messages tend to be very negative. Messages may include distorted thinking and irrational beliefs, such as, "I must be perfect at all things." Or they may include comments about our inadequacies and failures.

Stop and think about it. How many times this week have you thought to yourself something like, "Ugh – You're so stupid," "I'm not capable," or even something like, "I'm a fat slob." And how many times have you told yourself, "Great job," "You can do this!" or "You are a great person?"

Our thoughts typically include the former type of negative messages, but, often, they are so subtle, subconscious, and habitual that we do not even realize we are thinking so poorly about ourselves. Overtime, these negative thoughts and harmful messages chip away at our self-esteem and put us at risk for a downward spiral into depression.

Our **thoughts**, not actual events, create our moods, determine the way we feel about ourselves, and sometimes contribute to how we ultimately perform in various endeavors. 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 these events. And, similarly, disappointing things sometimes happen because we've psyched ourselves into failure via negative thinking.

If you find yourself feeling upset about a poor grade, it is not the letter at the top of the paper that is creating your mood, it's ultimately a subconscious thought that brings you down, such as, "I'm a failure," "I'm an idiot," or "I *should have done better.*"

I personally caught myself engaging in negative self-talk a few months ago when I backed into another car. My immediate thoughts were, "You are so dumb! You should have looked in the mirror! This is terrible!" I felt terrible. Recognizing the negative self-talk, I was able to change the messaging and tell myself, "This stinks but it's not the end of the world and everybody makes mistakes." Doing so helped me to feel better and protected my self-esteem from being damaged by personal attacks.

The good news is that negative self-talk can be reversed. It takes effort, much like breaking any bad habit. But when you learn to recognize and change the way you think on a daily basis, you can ultimately improve the overall way you feel. To learn more or to receive help in recognizing and shifting your negative self-talk, find a therapist who works from a Cognitive-Behavioral perspective. With practice, you can shift your entire way of thinking, improve your self-esteem, and have a more positive outlook.