

How to Address Negative Thinking

Negative self-talk is an accumulation of self-limiting messages that we have become in the habit of saying to ourselves. Breaking this destructive habit is possible, though it takes time and effort.

If you have been talking to yourself for a long time in this negative manner, it will take repetition and practice to learn more constructive and helpful ways of thinking. Following are some key steps to take to learn to talk to you yourself like a friend instead of an enemy.

Notice

Negative thoughts often come so quickly and automatically that we are unaware of them. We start to feel badly, but we do not notice the thoughts that are causing us to feel that way. In order to counter these thoughts and feel better, we first need to become aware of them when they are happening.

We have to "catch ourselves in the act" of negative self-talk, especially when we are dealing with new situations or situations that have always been difficult for us, e.g., public speaking, meeting new people or learning a new skill. When you start to feel anxious, upset, or sad, take it as a signal to pay attention to what you are thinking and/or thinking about.

Question

Given the reality that most negative self-talk is false, irrational, and self-defeating, it makes sense that the first thing you want to do is question what is happening and not just sit with your bad feelings. We can ask ourselves:

- What am I saying to myself that is making me feel badly?
- Do I really want to do this to myself?
- Do I really want to stay upset?

Breathe Deeply

Negative self-talk is often so rapid, automatic, and subtle that it can be hard to figure out exactly what you are saying to yourself. It is important to find a way to relax yourself, so that you can slow down your mind and body, and detect what negative messages you are using. A quick and easy way to relax is to take many deep abdominal breaths, feeling your stomach expand with air and then contract when you release.

Record the Thoughts

Write down the negative thoughts or inner dialogue that led you to feel anxious, sad, or depressed. The act of writing the negative self-talk down helps you to see it as separate from yourself, and make clear exactly what the thoughts are.

It may take some practice to do this and you will need to separate thoughts from the feelings that come as a result of them. You can try writing down the feeling first, e.g., "I'm anxious," and then the thought that led to it - "I will never get this done on time". Remember self-talk involves thoughts, not feelings.

Identify the type of negative self-talk

Does it sound like the self-critic, the hopeless one, the perfectionist or the worrier? How are you distorting what is happening? Are you over-estimating the risk, catastrophizing, over-generalizing, and/or filtering?

Respond to negatives with positives

Write down a positive and nurturing statement that counteracts the negative self-talk. Make it in the first person. For example: "I learn from my mistakes whenever I make them."

Record a Daily Record of Dysfunctional Thoughts

If you use it every day for a couple of months, you will find yourself automatically countering your negative thoughts with positive self-talk. You will feel much better and more able to handle the stress in your life. Make copies of it and use it every day.

*Adapted and excerpted from:
"The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook"
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