Challenging Negative Self-Talk

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Most people don't realize it, but as we go about our daily lives we are constantly thinking about and interpreting the situations we find ourselves in. It's as though we have an internal voice inside our head that determines how we perceive every situation. Psychologists call this inner voice '**self-talk**', and it includes our conscious thoughts as well as our unconscious assumptions or beliefs.

Much of our self-talk is reasonable — 'I'd better do some preparation for that exam', or 'I'm really looking forward to that match'. However, some of our self-talk is negative, unrealistic or self-defeating — 'I'm going to fail for sure', or 'I didn't play well! I'm hopeless'.

Self-talk is often skewed towards the negative, and sometimes it's just plain wrong. If you are experiencing depression, it is particularly likely that you interpret things negatively. That's why it's useful to keep an eye on the things you tell yourself, and challenge some of the negative aspects of your thinking.

You can test, challenge and change your self-talk. You can change some of the negative aspects of your thinking by challenging the irrational parts and replacing them with more reasonable thoughts.

With practice, you can learn to notice your own negative self-talk as it happens, and consciously choose to think about the situation in a more realistic and helpful way.

Challenging the Self-Talk

Disputing your self-talk means challenging the negative or unhelpful aspects. Doing this enables you to feel better and to respond to situations in a more helpful way.

Learning to dispute negative thoughts might take time and practice, but is worth the effort. Once you start looking at it, you'll probably be surprised by how much of your thinking is inaccurate, exaggerated, or focused on the negatives of the situation. Whenever you find yourself feeling depressed, angry, anxious or upset, use this as your signal to stop and become aware of your thoughts. Use your feelings as your cue to reflect on your thinking.

A good way to test the accuracy of your perceptions might be to ask yourself some challenging question. These questions will help you to check out your self-talk to see whether your current view is reasonable. This will also help you discover other ways of thinking about your situation.

There are four main types of challenging questions to ask yourself:

1. Reality testing
•What is my evidence for and against my thinking?
•Are my thoughts factual, or are they just my interpretations?
•Am I jumping to negative conclusions?
•How can I find out if my thoughts are actually true?

2. Look for alternative explanations
•Are there any other ways that I could look at this situation?
•What else could this mean?
•If I were being positive, how would I perceive this situation?

3. Putting it in perspective
•Is this situation as bad as I am making out to be?
•What is the worst thing that could happen? How likely is it?
•What is the best thing that could happen?
•What is most likely to happen?
•Is there anything good about this situation?
•Will this matter in five years time?

When you feel anxious, depressed or stressed-out your self-talk is likely to become extreme, you'll be more likely to expect the worst and focus on the most negative aspects of your situation. So, it's helpful to try and put things into their proper perspective.

4. Using goal-directed thinking
•Is thinking this way helping me to feel good or to achieve my goals?
•What can I do that will help me solve the problem?
•Is there something I can learn from this situation, to help me do it better next time?

Recognizing that your current way of thinking might be self-defeating (e.g., it doesn't make you feel good or help you to get what you want) can sometimes motivate you to look at things from a different perspective.
You can conquer your negative self-talk today by challenging yourself with these questions every time you catch yourself thinking something negative to yourself.