

What is Self-Talk?

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If you've read all the chapters up until this point, you've likely noticed the reoccurring idea that thoughts deceive, oppress, and belittle. Chapter one states: "More often than not, if you took your thoughts out of your head and gave them a voice, they would sound exactly like the abusive people of your past. You would certainly retaliate against anyone who talked to you so hatefully. So, why cower when it's you who is the bully?" In this chapter, you'll be introduced to the "inner bully," and learn how to face and overcome it through counseling.

What do You Mean by Inner Bully?

You have very little control over what comes to mind. Thoughts constantly appear, and typically do and say whatever they please. They can be pleasant and light one minute, and then turn on you—oppressing, assaulting, and deceiving—the next, often for no apparent reason. Like a bully, your mind will go out of its way to intentionally cause you pain. Given that you're in counseling or considering counseling, it is safe to assume that you have come face-to-face with your inner bully. This is the part of your mind that lies to you, cheats you out of happiness, and keeps you on edge because you never k

now when or where he will strike.

You can run but you can't hide from your inner bully. Even if you focus your attention on a certain thing, or intentionally recall a particular memory, your brain will soon trail off and carry you somewhere else. (If you have practiced the mindfulness meditation techniques mentioned in chapter 6, you have seen the truth of this first hand.) The mind incessantly and involuntarily explores, relives past events, fantasizes, and calculates. Though it encourages and praises at times, it is capable of producing mostly desire

and insults. Often times, these reveries lead you down a dark alley of your mind where the bully appears from the shadows.

This bully did not appear out of a vacuum, though. He was conceived, and is sustained, by the harmful words of others, and strengthened by your own insecurities. Notice how the bully amplifies and reverberates the words of others. It's bad enough when a loved one insults you; it can be unbearable when you also have to deal with the echo of their voice in your head. The sting of the initial offense lives on long after the spoken word. Your mind keeps the pain alive, replaying the hurtful moment hundreds of times—even if the person offended you only once. Imagine how stressful it would be if your insulter were to shout the same hateful phrase at you hundreds of times a day. Little do you realize, this is exactly what your bully does. You're just used to it. It's habitual, and it's been happening for a very long time. You've heard the bully all of your life. It's time to question whether his words are true.

From birth, other people have contributed to your self-image. People use words to describe your looks, work ethic, intelligence, athleticism,

artistic ability, etc. Other people's words impact how you talk about yourself, and cause you to believe things that are untrue.

Example: Let's say your mother raised you from birth to believe in a particular image of the world—that the earth is flat—and you believe it wholeheartedly. Does that make it true? Absolutely not.

A brief period of inquiry and research would reveal that the earth is, in fact, round. For thousands of years, this very idea caused people to believe a ship would sail off the edge of the earth if it ventured too far out at sea. The thought of a flat earth limited the potential of sailors who believed it, preventing them from discovering a "new world."

Similarly, if your mother told you from birth that you're stupid, does that make it true? Again, absolutely not. Truth is you are an intelligent person, but your bully keeps spinning deceit in your head, as it repeats your mother's words, "You're stupid! You're stupid! You're stupid! You're stupid! You're stupid!" Such badgering makes it nearly impossible to investigate truth undiscovered about yourself, thus greatly limiting your potential.

How have people's words and other outside influences fashioned your self-image? How do they limit you? Are their words true to who you are?

How do you talk to yourself as a result?

How Does the Inner Bully React to the Words of Others?

When someone speaks to you in a way that causes insult or discouragement, you typically respond in one of four ways:

Accommodating the bully

Dismissing, denying, or avoiding the bully

Becoming the bully

Facing the bully

Accommodating the bully. You accept the threatening information without question. Your mind then rearranges your current identities to make room for this new data. Such unbridled acceptance can cause previously held positive identities to be thrown out to make room for new hurtful ideas.

This

shift in information also causes a shift in thought. Your mind no longer echoes praise. It now prompts unsettlement and embarrassment, and these feelings begin deteriorating your self-identity. It's not recommended you

take this response. It encourages the bully to continue tormenting you because you show no effort to defend yourself.

Dismissing, denying, or avoiding the bully. This type of response is certainly better than simply embracing insult and allowing the bully to run rampant. Rejection of the threatening information, however, can lessen your chances of learning anything about yourself. This approach makes it difficult for you to investigate the truth behind hurtful words, as you are pushing them away from your inquiring mind. With this response, the bully in your brain is likely to be outraged by your avoidance. He will grow louder and more severe in an attempt to be heard, and he will continue until either satisfied or defeated by your response.

Becoming the bully. This is a case of “If you can’t beat them, join them.” Example: You’re offended because your boss tells you that you were not chosen for a promotion. Your thoughts instantly bombard you with memories of being denied. Only in this case, you strike back instead of accommodating or ignoring thoughts about what your boss said. Your thoughts no longer appear hurtful. Now they encourage you, but not in a healthy way. Rather, they entice you either to engage in fantasies about how

you could return pain on your insulter, or embrace the role of bully and ruthlessly attach yourself to reasons why you aren't good enough or don't deserve the job. In this case, you become your own worst enemy. With this response, the bully remains at large, and is guaranteed to return to incite a similar scenario next time you face threatening information.

Facing the bully. The bully exists. There's no denying that. It's time to silence him. But remember, he's sneaky. He hides in the shadows, repeatedly shouting insults and waiting to strike. You

have to find him in order to confront him, and most people look for him in all the wrong places.

The bully does not dwell in the event that insulted you, nor in the emotions you feel as a result. For example: when your boss denies you the promotion, you might think something like, "I'm angry because my boss did not give me the job." You think there are only two components to the problem: (1) *rejection* that leads to (2) *anger*. There is, however, a missing link, a third element. The bully is not in the rejection and he is not in the anger; he is in between. He is in the irrational beliefs you tell yourself, like, "I didn't get the job because my boss is a jerk," "I'm a failure," or "My boss

doesn't like me, and neither does anyone else." You see, the anger doesn't spring from the rejection; it results from your beliefs about being rejected. The bully dwells in these irrational beliefs. In order to shut him up, you must investigate the truth behind these beliefs.

Here are some common terms your counselor may use when referring to irrational beliefs:

All-or-nothing thinking: "Since I didn't get the promotion, I am not good at anything."

Jumping to conclusions: "Since I didn't get the promotion, my boss thinks I'm an idiot."

Fortunetelling: "Since I didn't get the promotion, I will never succeed at anything."

Focusing on the negative: "Since I didn't get the promotion, I can see nothing good happening in my life."

Disqualifying the positive: "Because I didn't get the promotion, I know my boss is only being kind when he compliments my work. He doesn't mean it."

Allness and Neverness: “Since I should have received the promotion but didn’t, I will always feel angry and never be happy.”

Minimization: “Any success I’ve had was just good luck and not important. I never deserved any of it. But my mistakes that led to not getting the promotion, which absolutely never should have happened, are awful and unforgivable.”

Emotional reasoning: “I didn’t get the promotion, so I am a total failure. The fact that I feel so bad is proof that I’m no good at all.”

Labeling and overgeneralization: “Because I should have gotten the promotion but didn’t, I am a *loser*.”

Perfectionism: “I realize I did fairly well to be considered for the promotion, but I absolutely should have been perfect. I am therefore incompetent” (Dobson, 2001).

Perhaps you notice a familiar irrational belief from the list above. If so, your counselor would be grateful to hear about it in your next session. A lively, therapeutic conversation would surely follow.

Facing the bully is the basis for positive self-talk. It is the act of investigating the untruths of irrational beliefs and learning to state the opposite. Simply put, expressing positive aspects about yourself in a loving, gentle, and compassionate manner counteracts of the bully. It strips him of power to harm.

“I didn’t get the promotion because someone else was more qualified. My boss likes me and I like him. I’m a reliable, proficient employee, and my coworkers are good people. I am still capable of attaining my goals, and they will come in time. Until then, I will make the most of my days and be the best person I can be.”

There is no room for your bully in this statement. Such simple words are powerful to build self-worth and bring balance to your troubled mind. Think of positive self-affirmation as killing your inner-bully with kindness by learning to speak using support, kindness, and tenderness.

The Self-Talking Cure

Limited research has been done on the therapeutic value of positive self-talk. A recent study, however, examined whether using positive self-affirmation could reduce stress. In the study, two groups of volunteers

were given a task to complete. Once the task was done, everyone was informed that they performed poorly on the task. One group filled out a self-affirmation worksheet after receiving the bad news, and the other group did not. The participants who filled out the worksheet were said to contemplate less on failure, suggesting that positive self-talk can decrease stressful thinking (Dutcher, 2012).

If positive self-affirmations are shown to reduce anxiety, then it is reasonable that repeated affirmations could be extremely useful tools for facing daily stressors. Stress impacts more than just the mind. It can also devastate the body, especially the immune system. (This topic is discussed in detail in chapter 5.) In this regard, a daily self-affirmation intervention could lead to a healthier lifestyle.

Unfortunately, we rarely enjoy silence. Even when we get alone, away from the hustle and bustle of work and relationships, we are always there, talking to ourselves whether we want to hear it or not. Given this, it's crucial you learn to speak nicely to yourself. For many, positive inner dialogue is ex

exercised through prayer. This inward expression can come from hopes, dreams, sacred writings, or an affirmation example you received along the way.

If it's impossible to stop the constant conversation with yourself, the goal should instead be to gain control of the conversation, not allowing the bully to dominate the dialogue. Become more aware of how you talk, and be more gentle and affirming with the person you talk to the most—you. The good news is you have the power to change yourself. Bettering the way you self-talk is a choice you can make, so choose a way that encourages and affirms your values and strengths. Treat yourself better than the negative people from your past. You don't have to be your own accuser. Instead, be you.

This may prove a better alternative for you than journaling if you don't like to write, but don't mind talking to yourself. Just like in journaling, experiment with ways to change how you affirm yourself. You may have lacked personal awareness for so long that you now find it hard to talk to yourself. It may be like talking to a stranger. If so, don't worry. You have the rest of your life to get to know you. Start by speaking to yourself as you

would someone you value. Treat yourself with care and compassion above all else.

What Should I Say to Myself?

The key to practicing self-talk is less about words and more an attitude of positive hope—not negative unrest. A large vocabulary is not a requirement. Just stay positive and encouraging. Be intentional with your affirmations. Use strong, direct, and supportive statements.

This chapter concludes with a list of example phrases to recite. However, don't feel as though you are limited only to these. Use the examples as a starting point to develop your own voice.

An Example of a Twice Daily Affirmation.

Beginning of the day: "Yesterday has come and gone. Today is a new day. It's my day. I'm strong and can trust myself to make good choices. I can do this, one moment at a time, one step at a time."

End of the day: "I did well today, and I deserve to rest. The struggles of the day in no way define me, although today's events, both good and bad, taught me more about myself. When tomorrow arrives, I'll

take this knowledge and put it to use. I have hope because I'm strong, and tomorrow I'll have another chance to change and grow.

But for right now, I'm satisfied. I'm proud."

Examples of Self Esteem Affirmations.

I am lovable.

I am worthy of friendship and love.

I accept myself.

I have a firm sense of self-identity.

I see myself genuinely and objectively.

I find deep tranquility within myself just as I am.

I speak positively about myself to myself.

I am a compassionate, caring, and honest person.

I forgive myself for everything I've done to others or myself.

Examples of Positive Thinking Affirmations Regarding Fear.

I am not someone who thinks fearfully.

Failure doesn't frighten me.

I will do the things I want to do without anxiety.

I will easily discard negative thoughts and attitudes about myself.

I am not a fearful person.

I expect to succeed because I am a successful, ambitious person.

I work hard to succeed and I will succeed because I've earned it.

The Counselor Column for Chapter 8: “What Is Self-Talk?” by Mark

Carpenter, LPC

This chapter brings a powerful memory to mind. I was sitting in a counseling session years ago. This was before I considered pursuing counseling as my profession. My counselor taught me to question my thoughts—my irrational beliefs—and believe a truer reality. This freedom came as I learned to treat myself differently—with love and compassion. Basically, I stopped beating myself up. Honestly, if I had not experienced that session I would not be writing this today. The freedom I experienced was powerful enough to begin my journey toward helping people for a living. As a professional counselor, I come to work everyday hoping to show people like you that you don't have to talk negatively to yourself. The revelation is: you get to talk to yourself anyway you choose. You can be your greatest

source of pain, or your greatest source of encouragement. The choice is yours.

The Client Column for Chapter 8: “What Is Self-Talk?” by Tyler Orr, NCC

Positive self-talk may be the hardest good habit to develop. In fact, I almost talked myself out of making the first appointment with my counselor because of my original thoughts about the profession of counseling. My mind’s voice told me that doing so was a sign of defeat, and that it wouldn’t work. Truth is I was bad husband because I believed I was. Similarly, I wasn’t the greatest dad because I didn’t believe I could be better. Learning to be kinder to myself took a lot of work, but now I feel good about being me. I’m a great husband and father, and I can say that with confidence. I like to jokingly say, “Better is better than bad.” Use this as a slogan to improve how you talk to yourself. It feels much better to affirm your person and believe that you’re worthy, instead of constantly keeping a soured self-image.