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By Gerry Hickey.

You can't afford the luxury of negative self-talk!

Many years ago I was given a present of a book called "You can't afford the luxury of a negative thought". It had such a positive effect on me that I contacted one of the authors, Peter McWilliams, in Los Angeles and we corresponded for a while. Peter sadly died a few years ago but he has left a wholesome legacy of wisdom. I thought the title of the book said it all and as a sub-title the authors had called it "how to stop being a victim". The link between negative thinking and feeling a victim was clear from both titles. The book itself addressed some poignant points regarding negative self-talk and the resultant unhealthy emotions of such a thought process.

Self-talk doesn't mean your going crazy or about to be locked up if someone sees you. It doesn't even mean that you are moving your lips, but inside your head a chatterbox constantly undermines your chance of peace. It nags and nags at you and when it is out of control it brings you with it to places that are riddled with anxiety, fear and denial. Everybody does it and sometimes it can cause you to act in uncharacteristic ways and to have dramatic mood changes although the source reasons for such changes may not be immediately obvious

The truth is that what we say to ourselves in response to a given situation will mainly determine our moods and feelings. As we mature these responses become automatic and we don't even examine them for appropriateness even though they are well passed their "use by" date. In other words, thoughts we had as we grew up to help us cope with the unfolding world around us are not necessarily suitable for use in adult situations.

The sequence of how negative self-talk affects us is fairly easy to explain:

SOMETHING HAPPENS ->>WE INTERPRET IT AND START SELF-TALK->>OUR FEELINGS AND REACTIONS KICK IN.

So, excepting more serious psychological conditions, we are responsible for how we feel based on this cycle of events.

For those who suffer with panic attacks or general anxiety there is an increased tendency towards negative self-talk. These are usually reaction statements which begin with the words "what if?" This has the effect of manufacturing a difficult situation as soon as the thought begins irrespective of whether there is solid evidence for the belief or not.

This type of distorted, unrealistic and illogical thinking leads to anxiousness and reactive depression. Its judgment tends to skew the way we look at ourselves, others and many situations in everyday life. The distortions are responsible for creating and sustaining anxiety, reactive depression, guilt and self-criticism.

The first step in dealing with these negative thoughts is to learn to recognise them. Counteractive measures can then be put in place to deal with them leading to a more balanced and objective outlook.

This is easier said than done as the thought system is usually so imbedded in us that we've engaged in it and suffered the consequences before we realise it. So the initial action is to slow down and learn to recognise our internal negative dialogue. Relaxation is an excellent method of doing this and you would need to learn this process, even just 20 minutes a day, so that you begin to monitor exactly how busy your mind is with negativity. A good suggestion is to listen to a piece of music or get a relaxation CD and make the space to listen to it daily. As long as you are able to temporarily empty your mind of "busy" thoughts and concentrate on some peaceful focus this will work.

Then you probably will begin to notice that much of your self-talk is irrational but almost always sounds like the truth. This leads to you expecting the worst from a situation and worrying about that. Yet there is unlikely to be any validity in your justification but you let that fact go unchallenged.

Have no doubt, if your mindset is such that you concentrate on the negative you find no end of opportunities to place that type of spin on anything. Sometimes you will even be right and the negative gremlin will have a party celebrating it's being right in one out of a thousand cases.

If you ever watch Will and Grace you may be familiar with Grace's mother. Every time Grace got it wrong her mother was there singing the "told you so, told you so" song. That is the gremlin in human form and many have had people in their lives like that. Constantly repeating the negative message, either from themselves or others, makes many people internalise it and begin to believe it to be true of them. However, the vast majority of times the gremlin will be totally wrong but seems to have the ability to make us selectively deny that fact and remember the few times it may have been correct.

And resulting from that denial you will have started a cycle where avoidance will be the order of the day. You have concocted some fears about a certain situation and because of perceived danger or rebuttal it is easier to avoid it and reinforce the unreal thought you started with. Doing this will effectively distance your connection with reality and may lead to more serious mood swings depending on how the reality pans out.

Sadness at having a different perspective on something from the majority, anger at self for worrying over nothing and withdrawing through fear and then regretting it, all contribute to depression and anxiety. So it is of paramount importance that we tackle the bad habit of negative self-talk and reverse the way we look at things to a more positive and ultimately healthy approach.

There are many personality types specifically prone to housing negative self-talk. They contain distorted thinking and here I will address 4 of the main ones and give some suggestions as to how to recognise and combat their negative effects on our lives. I see negative thoughts as opportunistic psychological viruses waiting for their chance to pounce once they find a person vulnerable to their effects. They will only stay with the person they find it easy to control.

[The Worrier.](#)

This is the sub-personality which promotes anxiety.

Worriers have distorted thinking and are prone to anxiety and fretting as they overestimate the odds of a negative outcome and create images of a “worst-case” scenario. Frequently these fears concern danger and embarrassment. “What if I get sick?”, “What will they think of me?” It doesn’t matter if logically a person thinks that things should be ok, there is a deeper ingrained thought saying that there will probably be a negative outcome. In fact the favourite saying of the Worrier seems to be “What if?” Examples of this are: “What if they leave me? What if they find out? What if they think? What if I fail?”

These responses are in fact a deeply entrenched habit produced as an automatic response. The dominant tendencies are (a) anticipating the worst, (b) overestimating the odds of this happening and (c) dramatising them with images of what disaster or failure will mean. But these are not accurate responses, they are false, need to be and can be changed.

The Critic.

This sub-personality promotes low self-esteem.

It is constantly judging and evaluating ones own behaviour. It is ever vigilant for any flaws and limitations one may have and is ever-ready to jump on any mistakes pointing out how much of a failure one is. “You are stupid, useless, and no good!” “You’ll never be anything!” are some of its favourite sayings and it makes sure that you hear these negative comments. The critic generates anxiety by putting you down and leaving you unable able to handle panic symptoms, going where you may like or need to go and stops you from being able to perform to your best. It will ignore positive qualities and justify its negative stance. It will compare you with others and start “shoulding” on you every chance it gets. Self-talk like “I should be more competent, I should be less of a burden, I’m so stupid, and I’m a looser” are hardly positive reinforcements of any position.

The Victim.

This sub-personality promotes depression.

The victim will leave one feeling helpless or hopeless or indeed both. It generates anxiety by insisting that you are not making progress that you’re a lost cause and you have no real chance of success even if you get glimpses of positive thoughts. It makes you believe that you are in someway defective, unworthy and deprived. It sends you into complaining, blaming and bemoaning. “I couldn’t do that...”, “I’ll never be able like them...”, “Why bother?”, “If only my upbringing was like theirs” and “They did this to me!” are some of the favourite sayings of the victim. These leave you feeling that there are insurmountable objects in the way of you achieving your goals and you might as well give up now. This leads to depression and sometimes the need to hit out at others and use the technique of blaming others rather than looking at oneself. “The boss will fire me, my parents did this to me, and they don’t take me serious, what’s the point?” are all examples of this and put a person into a hopeless frame of mind feeling weak, lost and stuck.

The Perfectionist.

This personality promotes chronic stress and burnout.

The perfectionist is closely related to the critic but rather than putting you down concentrates on pushing you to do better and it goads you into doing so. It constantly tells you that your efforts aren’t good enough, you should be working harder and you should always have everything under control. This is the part of you that insists on getting things right and is very intolerant of mistakes and setbacks. It has a tendency to make one believe that real success is dependent on external factors like money,

material things, status and acceptance by others. So it has you playing to the gallery. I remember an instance of being in the home of this sub-personality type person where the car parked outside and living room were spotless. However but the kitchen, where nobody was ever invited into, was equivalent to a rubbish tip. This person had severe depressive issues and this was reflected in the sharp contrast presented externally and the condition of the usually hidden kitchen. The perfectionist isn't convinced that a "labeled" existence is possible and constantly put you under stress and exhaustion in pursuit of its unachievable goals. "I should always be! I have to get!, I will no matter what!" are favourite statements of the perfectionist. The perfectionist will also have a tendency to judge others and undermine different values to theirs. Most are walking contradictions in terms as there will be most likely areas in their lives that are far from perfect and their judging others will be an effort to distract from their human flaws by their sub-personality.

Recovering from these forms of distorted thinking will take time and effort.

Established negative self-talk habits have taken years to imbed themselves and will not be rectified overnight. But with awareness, counteracting and consistency they can and will be changed for the better.

It would be important to look over one's life history at this stage and try and identify how this type of thinking came about. These sub-personalities are fear based and it would be essential to look at situations from earlier years where you felt fear and insecurity.

At that time there may have been very real reasons for such emotional response and therefore it was appropriate to be afraid and worried. Perhaps a parent or close loved one has gone through a series of unfortunate events and had fallen into the victim trap. Maybe shameful and embarrassing events had you judging yourself harshly with "should after should" statements. Being criticised by others over a long period may have had the effect of us internalizing that criticism and believing it. Or were we constantly trying to be better and better in the hope of getting some affirmation from a loved one who was otherwise distracted.

Family insecurity regarding finance, physical or verbal violence and parental illness are just a couple of examples that make the environment for a sensitive child a fearful one. Take a look at those who were in your environment as a child and see can you spot any of the 4 sub-personalities in them. Others worrying, blaming, criticising or constantly exerting effort may have inadvertently passed on to you the basis of your fears.

If such historical issues have not been addressed they may need to be. It is usually better to do this in the safe, confidential and supportive boundaries of a therapy room. And the good news is that many people respond quickly to psychological help if they have a deep desire to alter their outlook and health.

The main recovery suggestion is that we pro-actively question the negative self-talk and counteract it with positive angles. There are 10 recognisable questions we can ask ourselves once we become aware of our negative self-talk.

1. What is the evidence for this thought?
2. Is the outcome I predict always true?
3. What percentage of times in the past has this been true?
4. What are the chances of it really happening?
5. What is the worst thing that can happen?
6. What's so bad about that worst thing?
7. What can I do if the worst happens?
8. Am I looking at the big picture and not just focusing on possible negative?

9. Am I really being honest here?
10. What is the positive angle on this?

Up to now the validity of negative self-talk will not have been seriously questioned and sincerely doing so rattles the previous standard, automatic response system and helps to give you back control.

In putting in place positive self-talk, counteractive statements there are a few basic rules that make them more effective.

1. Avoid negatives. Drop the “I’ll try” approach and say “I will”
2. Keep statements in the present tense. “I can” and “I will” are examples of this.
3. Use “I” to begin statements, it shows you are taking back control of the thought process.
4. Cultivate beliefs in what you say, get evidence and affirm that.

Instances of the above would be as follows;

Worrier: Instead of saying “What if?” say “So what?”

Critic: Instead of “You should?” say “I’m ok”

Victim: Instead of “I couldn’t” say “I can”.

Perfectionist: Instead of “Oh no!” say “it’s good enough”

By now I’m sure you can see that there is a need to connect with the reality of the types of negative self-talk we are experiencing. It will take effort to rectify the thought process but it will be worth it. Keeping a daily diary would be very useful. Look back over the day and note the times you felt anxious, depressed, angry, inferior or otherwise upset. Then investigate the negative self-talk you were engaging in that caused the various feelings. Doing this will help identify actions to be taken as a means of addressing and reversing the problem of negative self-talk. Write down the negative statements you remember and then start to counteract them with positive ones in line with the recovery suggestions above.

After a month or two of doing this exercise you will begin to counteract negative self-talk automatically. You will be in a position to notice it happen immediately and internally show it the red light. You will be getting to the point where you can erase the negative version and counteract it with a positive adaptation. You will be able to say to yourself **“CANCEL THAT THOUGHT”** and replace it with a positive counter-statement. An example of this would be addressing a thought like “I’m not good enough”. As soon as the thought strikes you it is vital to say to yourself **CANCEL THAT THOUGHT!** And as the thoughts are constant it is vital to replace it immediately with some relevant, factual positive statement. Whether you believe it or not say “Of course I’m good enough” and then focus on the plants, the colour of the wallpaper or some such non-connected thought about something around you that allows the panic to subside as you refuse to let the negative thought imbed itself. Soon you will find that you are in control of your thoughts and by implication your moods and feelings. The deeply ingrained, bad habit of negative self-talk will revise to the positive and a new brighter, freer life emerges.