

## **CHANGING YOUR NEGATIVE SELF-TALK: The Process of Actually Creating and Becoming a “New You”**

It isn't enough just to understand what self-talk is. The next important step is to look at some specific and concrete ways to actually change it. The most critical part of changing your negative self-talk is to **DO SOMETHING NOW!** If you simply allow yourself to brood, fester, and ruminate, and you don't make a concerted effort to interrupt your negative self-talk, you'll just “go with the flow” (not a good idea in this situation) and continue to stay stuck in a morass of painful and uncomfortable feelings and self-defeating and destructive behaviors. The key to intervening, as has already been mentioned, is to slow down your internal process and to start to notice, often for the first time, that your self-talk is even there. Many people never allow themselves to slow down and look inside. This absolutely has to happen if any of the following strategies is going to be effective. Once you have noticed what is going on, you dramatically expand the possibility that something different can happen.

### **USE THOUGHT STOPPING**

The first strategy is called “thought stopping.” This simply involves catching yourself in the midst of your negative self-talk and saying loudly and firmly to yourself (or simply thinking to yourself if you are around other people) “*Stop*” or “*Stop it.*” This interrupts the pattern of negativity and can help remind you of your goal to decrease the negative self-talk. You can also be more gentle with yourself using this strategy by finding other words to say to yourself the interrupt the flow of negative thoughts. This might include saying things like “*Come on, Dave, you're getting negative again*” or “*Oh, oh, here I go again.*” Then, if you find that the negative thought is now gone or less demanding of your attention, give yourself credit, which only adds to the momentum toward the positive that you have started with your thought stopping efforts.

### **DISTRACT YOURSELF**

Another strategy is to distract yourself. When you notice your negative self-talk cropping up, focus your attention on something else and try to immerse yourself in it. To do this, either look around at something outside you that may be interesting or go inside and begin to daydream or to visualize something pleasant. If your self-talk becomes negative while you're waiting in a supermarket check-out line, for instance, and you choose to notice something outside yourself, try indulging in some “people-watching” or pick up a magazine and look at an interesting article. If you choose to go inward, think about the pleasant vacation you had last summer or imagine a time in your life when you felt positive and confident. Your mind has great difficulty focusing on two things at the same time. When you shift your focus to something new and more positive, you will stop the flow of the negative self-talk.

## **DEVELOP AND USE POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS**

A third way to begin to intervene in your negative self-talk is to start to identify and consistently use some positive affirmations on a regular basis in your day-to-day life. An affirmation is essentially finding a more positive statement about yourself or the world around you and then repeating it to yourself in a structured way one or more times a day. You might say it to yourself in the morning when you look in the bathroom mirror. You could say it to yourself when you are sitting at your desk at work. Or you might say it to yourself just before you fall asleep at night. You can also turn your affirmations into “visual signals” by printing them out and actually putting them in some of the places mentioned above to remind yourself of what you want to be thinking about.

Examples of affirmations could include statements like *“I am a good and worthwhile person,” “I deserve respect and love in my life,” “I have something important to offer to the people around me,”* or *“I have people in my life who love and value me.”* It can be very difficult to listen to yourself say these affirmations if negative self-talk forms most of your thought language, but this is a concrete and practical way to start creating a new way of looking at yourself and others and a new “life script” for yourself.

## **RECOGNIZE AND CHANGE YOUR NEGATIVE REHEARSALS**

Learning to actively confront and change your negative rehearsals is another important part of changing the negative self-talk process. If you think about it, getting yourself involved with a negative rehearsal, looking ahead and seeing the worst in a situation that hasn’t even occurred, is a lot like paying interest on a debt you haven’t even accrued. For instance, it would be like beginning to pay for a car six months before you actually took possession and started driving it. You wouldn’t do that with a car. Why in the world would you do it with your life? A negative rehearsal takes you out of the present moment due to the worry and “stewing” you are experiencing about some future event and wastes a great deal of your precious time. It takes you away from the present moment and from things that you could be enjoying right now.

Let’s turn to an specific example. Imagine that, for the past four Thanksgivings, you have had a horrendous time when you have gotten together with your extended family. Now it’s September or October and you’re already dreading the idea of doing the same thing all over again. You can picture your father being shaming and judgmental. You can see your uncle drunk and slurring his words. You can picture your mother getting nervous and agitated and starting to cry. You can see your partner becoming angry about being put in this situation again, which is likely to lead to a fight between the two of you (right then or later on). So, what can you do?

If you’re negatively rehearsing, you will end up brooding about this scene all the way up until you actually arrive at the gathering to join the “festivities.” And, in doing this, you feel powerless, victimized, anxious, and irritable, which may lead to feeling depressed and resentful, which in turn will probably lead to problems for you and others as you approach the holiday and make the holiday gathering itself even worse.

Instead of this all-too-familiar scenario, try something different. It might be sitting down with your partner and discussing your feelings about the holiday ahead of time. The two of you might then

come up with some positive ways of confronting and handling this potentially painful situation. It could mean spending less time there. It might mean taking time-outs when things are beginning to feel overwhelming and going for a walk together to “get a breather” from the gathering. Or it could mean focusing your attention on each other or on relatives you enjoy (e.g. playing games with your children or your favorite nieces and nephews).

The idea here, though, is to create a “positive rehearsal” and to actually plan, in a constructive way, how you are going to handle the chaos that is probably going to be all around you once again. This takes you out of your normally powerless position and gives you and your partner some very real options about how you can handle the situation more effectively when it does come to pass. Having a positive plan also means that you don’t have to worry so much in the month or two prior to the actual event. This idea of turning a negative rehearsal into a positive rehearsal can be used in any situation in your life where you find yourself worrying and fretting ahead of time about what might happen.

## **WORK HARD TO RESTRUCTURE THE ENTIRE NEGATIVE SELF-TALK PROCESS**

Another strategy to actually change your self-talk begins by assisting you in really looking at and attacking the negative self-talk by actively working on clearly identifying, understanding, and reframing the entire negative self-talk process. The first step is to slow down enough to notice the uncomfortable and distressing feelings that you experience near the end of the self-talk process. Most people assume that these feelings come directly from the anticipated or activating situation. But they don’t. The way to get at the thought process that actually triggers the feelings is to “back-track,” first to your self-talk and then even further back to your thought distortions and unrealistic core beliefs. As you backtrack, you need to work on coming up with different ways of thinking about yourself and the people and situations involved with your thought process.

Let’s say you come home at the end of the day and your partner is grumpy, impatient, cold, and withdrawn. Instead of saying to yourself, “*Who does she think she is acting that way around me?*,” “*She better not keep this up,*” “*She’s always in a lousy mood,*” and “*What a jerk!*,” you might want to work on becoming more tolerant and empathetic. If you were willing to do this, you might instead say to yourself “*She usually doesn’t treat me this way. Maybe she’s just having a bad day.*” This doesn’t mean that you can’t tell them how you feel about their behavior or ask them what’s going on, but more positive self-talk will probably influence how you feel about them and how you actually communicate your feelings to them when you decide to do this.

The next step involves going all the way back to identifying and addressing the thought distortions and unrealistic core beliefs. This would mean noticing when you are personalizing, labeling, or generalizing in this situation and catching yourself in that process. It would also mean identifying the unrealistic core beliefs that are part of this interaction, seeing clearly how they are setting up your self-talk process in the present situation, and perhaps thinking about where they came from originally. In the example above, the unrealistic core beliefs in action might be “*People and things should be the way I want them to be,*” “*Others should always be fair with me,*” and “*I have to have approval and respect from family, friends, and strangers.*” Having these rigid core beliefs in this particular situation means

that you are setting yourself up for negative self-talk and then overreacting in what you say and do around your partner. This is a time to question where those beliefs came from. They probably go back to your own family of origin or childhood. This is also a time to ask yourself if they really fit in an imperfect world (they don't!). At that point, you can make the choice to become more flexible and to realize that "we're all in this together" and, for most of us, doing the best we can with what we have.

This particular strategy can be used with negative self-talk about yourself as well. For example, when you make a mistake and are feeling irritated and impatient with yourself, you may say things to yourself like "*How can I be so stupid?*," "*What's the matter with me,*" or "*Why can't I ever get anything right?*" Trace these sorts of statements back to similar things that may have been said to you by your father, your mother, your teachers, or others during your childhood or in your adult life. Then challenge both the self-talk and the thought distortions and unrealistic core beliefs. In this situation, your unrealistic core belief might be "*I have to be competent and successful in everything I do.*" Confront this notion about the way life is "supposed to be" and try hard to come up with less shaming and more nurturing things to say about yourself. You might say "*I don't like that I made a mistake, but I can learn from it*" or "*I need to remember that I don't have to be perfect in order to be okay.*" Making your self talk more positive and having more patience with yourself will help change how you actually feel in the situation and what you do to actually learn from your mistake.

## **LEARN TO FORGIVE (BOTH OTHERS AND YOURSELF)**

Much of your negative self-talk comes from hurt and pain that have been created in your life by others around you, sometimes even the people who were supposed to be there to nurture and support you, like your parents and caretakers. If you grew up in a hurtful and shame-based family, you took on a load of negative self-talk that often continues to burden you even into the present. And, as you have gone through your adult years, there may have also been people and situations that only contributed more pain to your "slush fund" of resentment, bitterness, and negativity.

A critical element in changing your negative self-talk in the present is to identify and then actively work at forgiving the people in your life who, at any point, hurt and disappointed you. This is not an easy task. But as long as you hang onto the hurt and resentment that is embodied in these people and what they did to you, you maintain a strong connection to your pain from the past and you allow that other person to continue to control you and affect how you think and feel about yourself today.

Start to think about how you can begin the process of forgiveness with these sorts of people. It could be that you need to forgive a parent, sibling, peer, teacher, or coach from childhood who was shaming and punishing to you. It could be that you need to forgive a partner or friend from the past who was hurtful or disrespectful to you. Or it could even be that you need to forgive a former boss or co-worker who undermined you in your work environment. It is important to realize that forgiving does not mean forgetting. And forgiving also does not mean that you need to spend time with or feel good about people who continue to be hurtful, disrespectful, and shaming with you in the present. You can forgive people for what they have done to you and still maintain a healthy distance from them as a way to take care of yourself today.

Look for ways to acknowledge what others did to you, try to understand them and how and why they responded to you in the situation, and work to forgive them for what they did (keep in mind that forgiveness is often a lifelong process, not a single discrete event). You may want to sit down and write letters to the people you want to forgive (these can actually be sent or you may choose not to send them). You may want to do a role-play with someone you trust to create a forgiveness ritual related to some other person and what they have done to you. You may want to sit down and talk with the other person directly if that makes sense to you and them and you can feel safe doing this. You can even visit a gravesite to share what you wish to say with that other person. There is a model for looking at the process of forgiving others in the *Questions* section at the end of Unit III in this workbook.

In addition, part of forgiving means learning how to forgive yourself for what you have done with other people in the past. You may have been cruel, hurtful, punishing, and disrespectful with others as well, contributing to their negative self-talk, and leading to your feeling guilt, regret, and remorse and your own negative self-talk that these feelings can generate in your own life.

A final part of learning to forgive is making the effort to forgive yourself for mistakes you have made that have adversely affected your own life and how you feel about yourself as a person. Events and situations where you see yourself as a “failure” or a “loser” can create an enormous amount of negative self-talk today, as you go over them again and again in the present, especially when your life feels difficult or stressful. “Beating yourself up” for what has happened in your past is never helpful in moving on and living a healthy and more positive life. Examples of this could include failing to attain a goal you set for yourself, like dropping out of high school or college or leaving a job you “should have” kept. It could have to do with the loss of a marriage, a relationship, or a friendship due to something you did or did not do. It could be staying in a relationship long after you “should have” left it. Or it could even be thinking about yourself in demeaning ways because you were unable to effectively stand up for yourself as a child with an abusive parent, sibling, or peer.

There are a variety of ways to work at forgiving yourself for things you have done in the past. You could write a letter to yourself describing what happened and finding a way to move past it. This might include writing an “amends letter” to those you hurt, taking responsibility for what you have done and apologizing (see the *Tasks* section of this workbook for a model of this type of letter). This could be communicated directly to the other person or you could choose not to contact that individual and perhaps read the letter instead with a counselor or trusted friend. You could actually talk about the situation where you needed to forgive yourself with a therapist, a confidant, or a spiritual advisor. There is also a model for looking at the process of forgiving yourself in the *Questions* section at the end of Unit III in this workbook.

And once again, the goal in forgiving yourself is not necessarily to “forget” what you did but to learn from it so that you do not continue to make the same hurtful and self-destructive mistakes in your life and so that you can stop the litany of negative self-talk that these issues are still generating in your day-to-day living.

## **DEVELOP AND NURTURE AN “ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE”**

Negative self-talk thrives on living your life according to a model of scarcity, the idea that you never really have enough in your life to truly feel good about yourself. You may compare yourself to others around you, whether it is a talked-about celebrity in Hollywood, a local or national politician, a wealthy and newsworthy entrepreneur, a famous professional athlete, or even your next door neighbor, which only tells you that you have “failed” because you “aren’t like them” and “don’t have as much as they do.” Our culture and the world around us constantly communicate both subtle and very overt messages to us that we do not have “enough,” that we will never have “enough,” and that we will never “be enough.”

It is critical to begin to notice and acknowledge what you do have in your life. This can be a powerful way to counteract these negative and demeaning thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. This might involve thinking about your connection to the important people in your life like your family and friends, thinking about your health (which we often take for granted), thinking about your job or your home, thinking about a favorite pet, and working to focus on the many things that make you a special and worthwhile person living a special and worthwhile life. Start your morning, slow down at times over the course of your day, and end your evening as you are drifting off to sleep with a focus on what you have in your life to feel truly grateful for.

A feeling of gratitude keeps you connected to other people and the larger universe. Without these connections, it can be difficult to believe that you are cared for and loved by other people and that you actually have a place in the world. Feeling unloved and disconnected from others is an enormous generator of negative self-talk. If you tune into what you do have in your life, you will be much less likely to focus on comparing yourself to others and feeling deficient and defective because you don’t live up to some “standard” that exists “out there” about what it means to be a “successful” and “worthwhile” human being. You will also find yourself living more in the present and worrying less about what has happened in the past and what will happen in the future.

You can journal about what you have to be grateful for in your life; you can write a list of ways in which you feel and are, in fact, fortunate and blessed; or you can share some of your thoughts about this issue with a trusted friend or counselor. But, in any case, work hard to start to find ways to make this sense of gratitude an ongoing part of your life. The more you are able to do this, the less frequent and destructive your self-talk will be.

## **EXPLORE EMDR**

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) is a therapy modality that was developed by a woman named Francine Shapiro. It has been very useful in helping people get themselves out of the “negative ruts” that have been created over the course of their lives when difficult, shaming, or traumatic events have occurred and they have internalized the negative and destructive messages that arose from them. This is a procedure that can be done with your counselor if he or she has been trained in how to do EMDR.

In a nutshell, this process involves starting with a painful or difficult issue (which can include any of the situations or issues cues from your *Escalation Prevention Plan* in this workbook), identifying an image or a picture that represents the worst part of that issue, and then coming up with negative self-talk that usually accompanies the issue (as well as emotions and physical sensations that you would generally experience) and then identifying positive self-talk you would like to be experiencing in that same situation. The EMDR is then begun using one of a variety of methods (e.g. eye movements, tapping, or using auditory stimuli). It is uncertain exactly why EMDR works and is helpful, but it seems to unlock and reprocess what gets in the way of the brain being able to function more effectively and look at life in a more positive way. You can talk more with your counselor about whether he or she uses EMDR and what it is like to actually use this therapy technique.

## **DEVELOP EMPATHY AND COMPASSION (FOR YOURSELF AND OTHERS)**

The “bottom line” in the process of identifying, intervening in, and changing your negative self-talk is working hard to come to an understanding that all of us, in general, are doing as well as we can with what we have. Negative self-talk is, in reality, an absence of a connection to yourself and other people as imperfect human beings and to the larger universe in which we find ourselves. Negative, demeaning, and shaming thoughts rupture the bridge between you and everything that exists around you (which includes severing a very real and important connection to yourself).

A major aspect of understanding and intervening in your negative self-talk has to do with developing empathy and compassion for yourself and those around you. Negative self-talk involves giving up on yourself and other people because you and they have flaws and do not live up to some unrealistic and perfectionistic standard of “how things ought to be in life.” This way of viewing yourself and the world around you just doesn’t work. Developing empathy and compassion can serve as a powerful antidote to this way of being.

In reality, having empathy for yourself is not self-pity or simply “feeling sorry for yourself.” These kinds of responses only put you in a more self-absorbed and victimized position and interfere with your responding to your troubles in a more effective way. And empathy for others doesn’t mean that you are “weak” and that others will see your weakness and then take advantage of you.

Empathy involves “seeing things through someone else’s eyes” and trying to understand that “we are all in this together” and generally “doing the best we can” (this includes you as well). Empathy is a skill that can be developed in us (even if you didn’t learn how to do this in childhood or it is difficult to experience at this moment in time) which we can use to tune into our own life experiences in order to emotionally connect with another person’s thoughts and feelings in a similar situation. Compassion involves a deep understanding that, no matter what our individual life circumstances, we are all painfully human (with the attendant joys and sorrows that accompany that state), excruciatingly imperfect, and ultimately equal to and very much like one another despite our ostensible differences.

Some people, especially if they have grown up receiving a lot of shame-based and punishing messages from those around them, have great difficulty even “getting in touch” with the empathetic part of themselves. This is certainly true of angry people who often have little thought or caring about the impact of their disrespectful attitudes and behaviors on others. They may be too self-centered and self-

absorbed because, as children, they never really had a solid emotional connection with someone else, especially an adult, who took time with them, truly cared about them, gave them the sense that they were important and special, and showed them what empathy was by actually empathizing with them. If you are a person who has difficulty being empathetic, think about trying some of following ideas to get more in touch with the empathy that is an important part of being human and an important part of decreasing the anger in your life:

- 1) If you were disrespected and abused in the past, work hard to think about what you felt or might have felt in those situations. When you are disrespectful in the present, others experience the same sorts of feelings that you experienced in the past. Try to “put yourself in their shoes” in the current situation by remembering how you felt in the past.
- 2) Try to find people in your life who can serve as role models in your journey to become more empathetic. Watch how they act in situations where they are being empathetic with you or someone else. Notice what they say, how they look, and what they do to communicate empathy for you and others. If possible, you may even want to take the risk to ask them about what they think and feel when they are experiencing or demonstrating empathy for others. Then start to incorporate some of what you see or hear about into your own behavior when there is an opportunity for you to actually empathize with someone else.
- 3) Once you have identified some of the attitudes and behaviors that accompany feeling empathy, try to act “as if” you were truly empathetic in situations in the present when empathy could be appropriate or helpful in your relationship with someone in your life. This is not just a “pretend game” or “make-believe;” in fact, these are opportunities to practice the skill of becoming more empathetic and, like many skills, empathy is something that can be developed and nurtured in your current life, even if you did not receive these lessons from those around you when you were young.
- 4) Finally, think about allowing yourself to resonate with bursts of emotion that you may spontaneously experience in a variety of different situations. Children, pets, or other animals, because of their vulnerability, may help put you in touch with the fragility and the vulnerability of us all. Books, stories, artwork, photographs, music, movies, television programs, and even TV commercials and greeting cards may elicit strong emotional reactions in you (e.g. tearfulness that can involve anything from joy to sadness) that indicate that you are thinking about or actually connecting with the situations or feelings being communicated or portrayed. This can be a powerful connection to others outside yourself even if it is not with another person who is really a part of your life. This process, especially for men, may involve discomfort and a subsequent attempt to “shut down” those softer or more vulnerable emotions. Instead, try to allow yourself to appreciate and “go with” that triggering moment and the emotions that you are experiencing. This can also be practice in identifying and connecting with other people in an empathetic way.



Communicating empathy to others is an important part of feeling empathy for others in your day-to-day living as well. Supportive words can show another person that you are with them in the emotional pain they are experiencing. Saying things like *“I’m really sorry this is happening to you”* or *“I’m with you at this time; is there anything I can do for you?”* is much more helpful than simply saying *“Don’t worry; I’m know that things will get better for you”* or *“I’m sure you’ll get over this,”* which can come across as dismissive, uncaring, and unfeeling. In addition, physical touch (if the other person is comfortable with this) can be healing and comforting at a difficult time; offering a hug or a touch on the hand, the arm, or the shoulder also can communicate that you are “there” for that other person.

In the end, negative self-talk alienates you from yourself and others. It means you are continually “assuming the worst” and “seeing the cup as half-empty.” Positive self-talk celebrates your own and others’ humanness, uniqueness, and spirit and brings you more understanding, empathy, acceptance, and tolerance for who you and others are. It means you are “assuming the best” in yourself and others and “seeing the cup as half-full.” It is looking for and seeing “goodness” rather than just the “badness” in the world. Working toward the positive self-talk makes a great deal more sense if you really want to experience life as the blessed time it can be (for you and those around you). Make a commitment to yourself that you will focus on doing just that.

You can start to identify your own negative self-talk and your own thought distortions and unrealistic core beliefs and begin to work to change your negative self-talk into more positive self-talk by using the *Self-Talk Log* that is included later in this unit. Writing down what is going on in your head is a very helpful way to start to notice it in an ongoing way. Some specific examples of how to actually use the *Self-Talk Log* follow the log itself.