



Self-Talk

What we say to ourselves in response to a situation is what determines our mood and feelings. Often, we say it so quickly and automatically that we do not even notice. That is why we often get the impression that the external situation makes us feel the way we do. But, it is really our interpretations and thoughts about what is happening that form the basis for our feelings.

Anxiety can be generated on the spur of the moment by repeatedly making self-statements that begin with the two words, “What if.”

- Self-talk is usually so automatic and subtle that you don’t notice it or the effect it has on your moods and feelings. You can learn to slow down and take note of your internal self-talk.
- Self-talk that leads to anxiety and stress is typically irrational, but almost always sounds like the truth. “What-if” thinking may lead you to expect the worst possible outcome in a given situation.
- Negative self-talk creates a cycle of avoidance. You tell yourself that some situation is dangerous or bad so you avoid it. By continuing to avoid it, you reinforce the thought that it is dangerous.
- Self-talk can start or aggravate a panic attack. A panic attack often starts with symptoms of increasing physiological arousal, the body’s natural response to stress – the fight-or-flight response. There is nothing abnormal or dangerous about it. Yet, these symptoms can remind you of previous panic attacks. Instead of simply allowing your body’s physiological reaction to rise, peak and subside in its own good time, you scare yourself into a more intense reaction with your self-talk. “Oh no, it is happening again.” “What if I lose control?” “I have to get out of here now.” “I’m going to fight and make this go away.” This self-talk aggravates the initial physical symptoms, which in turn leads to more negative self-talk.
- Negative self-talk is a series of bad habits. You learn to think that way. Acquiring healthy mental habits takes persistence and practice.

Notes:

Sub-Personalities Lead to Different Types of Negative Self-Talk

The WORRIER (promotes anxiety)

The Worrier creates anxiety by:

- Anticipating the worst
- Over-estimating the odds of something bad or embarrassing happening
- Creating grandiose images of potential failure or catastrophe
- Being overly vigilant, looking for any small symptoms or signs of trouble

The Worrier’s favorite self-talk expression is: “What if…”

Examples of a Worrier’s self-talk:

- “What if I panic and lose complete control of myself?”
- “What if I start stammering in the middle of my speech?”
- “What if they do not like what I prepared for them?”
- “What if I am alone and there is nobody to call?”

The VICTIM (promotes depression)

The Victim creates anxiety and depression by:

- Telling you that it is helpless or hopeless
- Telling you that you are not making any progress
- Telling you that the road ahead is too long and steep for you to have a chance
- Telling you that there is something wrong with you, you are deprived, you are unworthy, etc.
- Believing that nothing will ever change

The Victim’s favorite self-talk expressions are: “I can’t.” “I’ll never be able to.”

Examples of a Victim’s self-talk:

- “I will never be able to do that, so what is the point in even trying?”
- “I feel physically drained today, why bother doing anything?”
- “Maybe I could have done it if I’d had a better life. But it is too late now.”
- “Nobody understands how hard it is for me. My life is hopeless.”

The PERFECTIONIST (promotes chronic stress and burnout)

The Perfectionist promotes chronic stress and burnout by:

- Constantly telling you that your efforts are not good enough
- Telling you that you should be working harder
- Telling you that you should have everything under control
- Telling you that you should always be pleasing others
- Being intolerant of mistakes or setbacks
- Telling you that your self-worth is dependent on externals such as acceptance by others, status, money, achievement, etc.

The Perfectionist's favorite self-talk expressions are: "I should." "I have to." "I must."

Examples of a Perfectionist's self-talk:

- "I should always be on top of things."
- "I should always be considerate and unselfish."
- "I should always be pleasant and nice."
- "I have to be liked by everyone."

The CRITIC (promotes low self-esteem)

The Critic promotes low self-esteem by:

- Constantly judging and evaluating your behavior
- Pointing out your flaws and limitations whenever possible
- Comparing you to others, and usually seeing them as coming out on top
- Ignoring your positive qualities and emphasizing your inadequacies

The Critic's favorite self-talk expressions are: "What a disappointment you are!" "That was stupid!"

Examples of a Critic's self-talk:

- "You stupid idiot. Why did you do that?"
- "Can't you ever get it right?"
- "You could have done much better."
- "Look at how capable so-and-so is. What is wrong with you?"

Catch yourself in the act of engaging in negative self-talk. Be aware of situations that are likely to start or get worse with negative self-talk.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC Clinic staff are also available to help at any time.

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Countering Negative Self-Talk

- **Notice.** Catch yourself in the act of engaging in negative self-talk. Be aware of situations that are likely to be started or made worse by negative self-talk.
 - When you are feeling anxious or stressed
 - Having to face a difficult task or situation
 - When you are feeling depressed or discouraged
 - When you have made some mistake and feel critical of yourself
 - When you feel guilty, ashamed or embarrassed
 - When you are angry at yourself or others
- **Stop.** Ask yourself any or all of these questions:
 - What am I telling myself that is making me feel this way?
 - Do I really want to do this to myself?
 - Do I really want to stay upset?
- **Relax.** Disrupt your train of negative thoughts by taking a moment to relax. Let go, slow down, and relax.
- **Write down** the negative self-talk or inner dialogue that led you to feel anxious, upset, stressed, or depressed. This step may take some practice to learn. It is important to identify self-talk to be able to disentangle thoughts from feelings.
- **Identify** the negative self-talk you engaged in (worrier? critic? victim? perfectionist?). Look to see if you are engaging in cognitive distortion. Are you making a mountain out of a molehill?
- **Answer or dispute** your negative self-talk with positive, rational self-supportive statements. Write down an opposing counter-statement. You can ask yourself these questions to help you come up with counter-statements:
 - What is the evidence for this?
 - Is this always true?
 - Has this been true in the past?
 - What are the odds of this really happening or being true?
 - What is the very worst that could happen?
 - What is so bad about that?
 - What would I do if the worst happened?
 - Am I looking at the whole picture?
 - Am I being fully objective?

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