

Changing your Internal Dialogue or 'Self-Talk'



Your 'internal dialogue' or 'self-talk' is quite simply your thoughts. It is the little voice in your head that comments on your life, whether that is what is going on around you, or what you are thinking consciously or sub-consciously (the part of the mind of which we are not fully aware but which influences our actions and feelings). All of us have an internal dialogue, and it runs all the time. It is the way in which you apply logic to what is happening, and try to understand it, although the logic may sometimes be skewed, prone to error, or driven by your emotions or past experiences. In other words, our internal dialogue can get things wrong.

The Importance of Internal Dialogue

Internal dialogue is part of what makes us human, and particularly gives us the ability to reason and think about situations.

But what you think, and the language you use, can affect your mood, your self-confidence and your self-esteem. Your internal dialogue can therefore be both helpful and unhelpful. For example:

- If you are inclined to be anxious, your internal dialogue can reinforce your anxiety. Some commentators suggest that **anxiety** can also upset your internal dialogue, creating a vicious cycle
- If you have low self-esteem, an internal dialogue of constant self-criticism can make things much worse
- The worst bully you are likely to encounter can be your own thoughts or 'self-talk'
- Just as smiling makes you feel happy, being exposed to negative language and unhappy thoughts can have an effect on your mood. This includes in your internal dialogue, if it tends towards 'beating yourself up'
- Being able to have a more positive internal dialogue, can help you feel more positive, be more compassionate towards yourself, and improve your mood.

All this combines to suggest that learning to manage your internal dialogue is likely to be important for both mental well-being, and potentially, a more contented life.

Developing a discrepancy

Consider how you would treat a friend or a child if they'd done something that they regretted. How would you behave towards them? How would you speak to them? What words and tone would you use? Would you try to make them feel better about themselves? Fill out the left hand column in the table below and then compare and contrast this with how you would treat myself in the same situation.

How I would treat a friend/child if they'd done something that they regretted	How I would treat myself in the same situation

Managing Your Internal Dialogue with N.A.C.R.

Notice

Before you can manage your internal dialogue, you first need to become more aware of it. If we never notice how we are talking to ourselves, we have no power to change it. Some of us are very aware of our internal dialogue, as a constant ongoing conversation in the brain. Others are much less so, and may find it harder to tune in. One way to become aware of it is to try doing some meditation, because this helps you to concentrate on your thoughts. Another technique is to consciously think 'I wonder what my next thought will be'. This will give some space for the brain to become aware of what it is happening. What you are chiefly trying to become aware of is the types of thoughts you tend to think, including:

- Where your internal dialogue goes if you let it wander. This can give you a good idea of what is bothering you at any given time;
- Negative, self-critical language

Arrest

If you notice that you are being abusive towards yourself with your self-talk, halt it in its tracks. Arrest it, put it in handcuffs. Stop it before it goes any further. It may be helpful at this point to write down the negative things you say to yourself every time you say them throughout your day. Maybe keep a notebook/piece of paper and pen on you. You may be surprised at how self-abusive you are towards yourself.

Challenge

Now challenge these thoughts. Our self-critical internal dialogue is often not based upon hard facts or evidence, and it's not always our good friend. To challenge it ask yourself the following questions:

- Is it true?
- Is it factual? i.e. is there evidence to support it?
- Is it helpful? Is it helping me to achieve my long term goals?
- How different might I feel if I didn't have this/these thoughts?

For example your self-talk may be saying things like:

- I'm useless
- I'm hopeless
- I'm a (insert your own swear word)
- I'll never improve

How true are these statements? Let's have a look:

Are you really useless? You have no use? You have never achieved anything? You've never done anything useful to yourself or for others?

Does the fact that you've made a mistake automatically erase every good thing you've ever done?

"Find me a person who has never made a mistake and I'll show you a liar"

Anonymous

The astronomer, physicist and engineer Galileo Galilei once said, *"I have never met a person so ignorant that I couldn't learn something from him."*

Are you totally without hope? There will never be anything in your life to look forward to?

How helpful is it to think like this?

How much better might you feel without such thoughts?

"When we meet real tragedy in life, we can react in two ways - either by losing hope and falling into self-destructive habits, or by using the challenge to find our inner strength." Dalai Lama

Replace

Given that these statements are damaging and unhelpful, it is really important that we replace these thoughts with more factual, supportive and helpful statements. Change the language to the sort of things you might say to a good friend when they are struggling. Build up a repertoire (selection) of positive and empowering statements to replace the harmful and negative self-talk.

These might include:

- *I am a capable and competent person*
- *I am a strong and worthy person*
- *I sometimes make mistakes but generally I am always doing my best and striving to improve*
- *I am capable of learning from my errors*
- *I am a caring and empathic person*
- *I am a work in progress, I am not perfect but nor is anyone*
- *I am friendly and approachable*
- *I am a good mother/father/daughter/brother/son/sister/friend*
- *I am a kind and compassionate person*
- *I generally try to do the right thing*

Complete the table below to create a repertoire of more helpful replacement statements

Negative things I say to myself	More helpful replacement statement

Ways to treat, soothe or just be nice to myself

It is easy to fall into the trap of 'beating yourself up' internally, and criticising yourself all the time. We put expectations on ourselves that we would never demand of our trusted friends. It's like we expect to get through our whole lives without ever making a daft decision or doing anything less than perfectly. Looking for ways to improve is useful, but blaming yourself because you have failed to achieve is not. **It is important to try to avoid negative self-critical thinking in your internal dialogue.**

One way to do this is to consciously change what you are thinking. If you 'hear' yourself thinking something negative or self-critical, focus on something more helpful instead. For example, instead of thinking about what you did wrong, think about what you will do differently next time, or what you have learnt, or even what you did well.

If you struggle to avoid self-critical thinking, try this exercise:

Next time you find yourself thinking something negative, consciously think about the opposite, but much more so (say, double, or even more). Think about it in plenty of detail: how it would look and feel, how it would make you behave and so on.

Notice how this makes you feel.

Try to Live in the Present (mindfully)

Your internal dialogue often tends to focus on the past or 'What might have been', and the future or 'What might be'. Focusing on the present therefore both quietens your internal dialogue a little, and also helps you to concentrate on, and appreciate, what is happening now.

This is the basis of mindfulness. To learn more about this why not come to the Mind Your head group at your hub. See your worker or the group worker for details.

Be Grateful for What You Have

One way to change the direction of your thoughts, and particularly to prevent yourself from wanting more is to think about what you have to be grateful for. This helps you to be more positive, because you are looking for the good in your life. It has been proven that people who take time out to acknowledge what they are grateful for have better levels of wellbeing. More on this at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/oct/23/is-gratitude-secret-of-happiness-i-spent-month-finding-out>

We all have moments where our internal dialogue seems to go off by itself, and can spiral into a negative tirade. When you feel this happening to you, it can be helpful to actually tell yourself to stop, as this pulls you up short, and reminds you that this is unhelpful.

Some people find that a firm but gentle mental tone, and assertive 'Stop that!' works best, and others feel the need to speak out loud to get the full effect.

You may need to experiment to find the formula that works best for you.

Controlling Your Internal Dialogue Takes Time and Practice

Like any other mental exercise or practice, it takes time to learn how to listen to, and then control, your internal dialogue. At first, you will probably find it difficult. The more you practise, however, the easier it will get, although you will still have times where you struggle. This is completely normal.

"Being crap at something is the first step to being good at something, Dude"
Jake the Dog from the cartoon Adventure Time

It is, however, important not to make it worse by beating yourself up because you have failed to manage your thoughts!

Instead, just chalk it up to experience, and move on. Next time it will be easier.

Read more at:

<https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/managing-self-dialogue.html>

<https://self-compassion.org/exercise-5-changing-critical-self-talk/>