

Negative Self-Talk: Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

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What is Negative Self-Talk?

As Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Mary Ellen Donovan point out in their book *Women and Self-Esteem: Understanding and Improving the Way We Think and Feel About Ourselves* (1985, Penguin Books), individuals with low self-esteem carry with them powerful negative statements and/or visual images about themselves and their lives. These statements and images seem to operate on auto-pilot. They are so well rehearsed that they have become automatic responses to almost any encounter, decision-making opportunity, or event. For instance...

No matter what I do, I mess things up.

Look at myself. I'm so ugly. Who would ever want to talk with me anyway?

No one understands me. No one cares.

I'm so lazy. I never finish anything.

Where Does Negative Self-Talk Come From?

The origin of these messages may be very clear. Perhaps we were mistreated as children, experienced a series of misfortunes, or were teased or criticized by those around us. Perhaps our religious or home education sent us messages that confused humility and charity with self-loathing and martyrdom. Perhaps our role models themselves demonstrated low self-esteem, and we came to idealize self-denigration.

Understanding the reasons we've developed patterns of negative self-talk is important. The next step is to recognize the impact of holding onto these patterns.

What Impact Does It Have on Our Lives?

As Dorothy Corkille Briggs stated in her book *Celebrate Yourself* (1986, Doubleday), "In a real sense through our own self-talk we are either in the construction business or the wrecking business." Negative self-talk wrecks our power, abilities, relationships, and lives. When negative self-statements and self-images are allowed to surface in our day-to-day lives unchecked and unchallenged, we become hypnotized into believing and behaving as if these messages were true. We create a "self-fulfilling prophecy"—our words and images eventually determine our future.

Consider this example:

Before puberty, Sarah had been a chubby child. Her face was round. Her belly was round. And her peers teased her constantly. As she entered puberty, she began to grow. Her body lengthened, and she began to lose the baby-like roundness of her face. However, she continued to carry with her the critical messages of her childhood peers. Whenever she encountered a new group of people, she thought, "I'm so fat and ugly. No one will ever like me." Based on these thoughts, she protected herself from the criticism she feared by avoiding any situations where she might get attention. She kept very quiet. She sat in the back of her high school classrooms. She had lots of great ideas that would have made contributions in class, but she doubted herself. Teachers gave her low marks for classroom participation, and Sarah thought to herself, "You see, even the teachers don't like me." Once she passed a group of teenagers in the hall at school and overheard them say, "What's wrong with her? She must think she's too good to talk to us." Sarah was hurt by their criticism. "You see," she said to herself, "it's true—no one ever likes me."

How Do We Eliminate Negative Self-Talk?

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If we can hypnotize ourselves with negative statements and images, certainly we can change our beliefs and behavior by practicing positive self-talk. Just like the athlete who uses mental rehearsal to ensure successful performance in a competition, we can intentionally train ourselves to think positively and expect good things in our lives, following these steps:

1. **Become aware** of it as it's happening.
2. **Interrupt the automatic process.** When you hear yourself repeating those familiar negative words in your mind (e.g., "I'm so weird. No one could ever want to be my friend") say to yourself, "STOP."
3. **Briefly debate the negative self-statement** and notice the imperfection of human beings. ("Sometimes I may act kind of goofy. But other times I'm serious or composed. My behavior varies from situation to situation. When I think about it, some of the "popular" people act goofy sometimes, too.)
4. **Forgive yourself** for your own imperfections. ("You know what? It's okay to act goofy sometimes.") Maybe you can even go a step further and **celebrate your humanness!** ("Actually, sometimes, I make myself laugh when I'm goofy. I'm sure glad I'm don't have to be serious all the time.")
5. **Replace the negative self-statement with a positive message.** ("It's okay to act differently. It's what makes me an individual. I'm just as capable of being liked as anyone else in this room.") Don't allow yourself to debate this new, positive message. It is sufficient and powerful on its own.
6. Begin to use mental visualization to **rehearse positive, affirming behavior and beliefs.** Picture yourself handling situations confidently, comfortably, and with a positive attitude. Create a new self-fulfilling prophecy, one of construction not destruction. You owe it to yourself and to the world that needs your talents and gifts.

TRY IT OUT

1. List one negative self-statement that your experience regularly:

2. What was the origin of this thought (messages from family, peers, religious leaders, teachers, others)?

3. How does this belief interfere with what you do, what you get out of life, what you contribute to others/the world?

4. Write down evidence that would dispute this negative self-statement.

5. Write down a positive self-statement that you will use as an alternative.

6. On a small piece of paper, write the positive self-statement. Post this where you will see it regularly, or carry it in your pocket throughout the day. Rehearse this statement frequently, without debating it or the value of this exercise.