

Get out of your own way!

Do you spend a lot of your day focusing on the negative? Glass half empty? When something negative happens to you, what do you tell yourself? Take a minute to think about what you said to yourself recently when something didn't work out the way you wanted it to. Was it kind and helpful? Or did you turn on yourself?

"My golf game sucked! I'm so useless I can't even hit a ball anymore! What's wrong with me?"

"Talk about having no self-control. You already feel fat, and nothing fits you comfortably, but you can't for the life of you stop eating junk food. You are pathetic!"



A matter of survival

If you are like most people, when things don't turn out the way you want, your mind floods with negativity. Neuroscientists call this automatic habit of the brain '*negativity bias*'. And we can thank our caveman ancestors for this. Negativity bias is an adaptive trait of human psychology that helped us survive on the savanna 250,000 years ago, armed with spears and hunting for food.

Fast track to 2021 and our brains' automated habit leaves us reacting to a difficult conversation, an unhappy customer or a poorly placed last putt as if our life was in danger. A cascade of stress hormones is activated and leaves us honed-in on the potential threats, unable to step back and see the bigger picture. And the interesting part of this is that the primitive, fight, flight or freeze part of the brain cannot tell the difference between a harsh

email and a hungry sabertoothed cat. The stress response launched by the brain is identical regardless of the context.

In his book *Buddha's Brain*, neuroscientist Rick Hanson says that our brain "is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones." When we have a challenging conversation with our partner, receive a confronting text or face the hundreds of disappointments life dishes out every day, our brains are wired to forget all the good things and instead focus on the negative ones. Taking this one step further, our lens of negativity fuels our inner critic.

We feel how we think

How did you feel after you have lambasted yourself for doing something stupid? In reality, focusing on the things that we haven't done well or haven't turned out the way we wanted to fuel negative emotions. What we think determines our emotions and our mood. If the conversations we have in our heads are personally disparaging and shaming, they will influence how we feel about ourselves, how we show up in our lives and how we respond to things that happen to us.

What is self-talk?

Self-talk is part of being human. It is something we do automatically throughout our waking hours. Our brain is always mulling over what we are experiencing in our daily lives. There is abundant research that shows that positive self-talk can be a powerful tool for increasing our self-confidence and reducing our negative emotions. Although positive self-talk is a natural way of being for some, most of us need to learn how to cultivate positive thoughts and eliminate negative ones. It's like going to the gym. The more we practice 'building this muscle', the more we will wire this way of thinking in our brain.

Positive self-talk is supportive and affirming, whilst negative self-talk can leave us feeling sad and defeated. Contrast the following two inner statements:

"I'm going to speak up today because I have something important to contribute."

"I don't think I am going to say anything because I'll look stupid if I say the wrong thing."

The snowball of rumination

Rumination, in my opinion, is a beast on its own. It happens when we continually push the replay button on thoughts or events that have upset us or perhaps made us cringe and feel ashamed. This constant replay in our head can result in a small issue snowballing. Working through a problem can be useful, but constant rumination can significantly increase our stress levels and puts us at risk of experiencing anxiety and depression.

Here's an example of how negative thoughts and self-criticism can snowball and become self-defeating:

"I look so fat in this dress. I really am fat. Look at those thighs. No wonder I can't get a date. Why can't I lose weight? It's impossible."

Rewiring our brain

There are healthy ways to cope with our inner critic and tendency towards negative bias. Below are three steps you can try. As we are all unique and different, I encourage you to experiment and see for yourself what works for you.

Step 1: Observe and notice

Bring awareness to your negativity bias and how and when this fuels your inner critic. Spend the next few days noticing when you slip into self-doubt, rumination, anxiety and fear. Begin to notice when your mind starts spinning out worst-case scenarios. Listen closely to your inner dialogue. Are you being critical or negative? Would you say those thoughts and words to people you love? Are they common themes that you tend to repeat when in this negative thought? Write them down.

Step 2: Challenge your thoughts

For each of the thoughts and words you have become aware of in step one, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I overreacting? Is it really such a big deal? Is it that important in the long run?
- Am I generalising? Are my thoughts based on fact or on my opinion?
- Am I mind reading? Am I guessing what someone else is thinking?
- Am I judging myself harshly? Am I using critical words like "stupid," "hopeless," or "idiot?"
- Is this a black or white thought? Am I looking at a situation as either wrong or right versus seeing the many shades of grey in between?
- Am I being objective? How truthful and accurate is this thought? How might a friend view this thought?

Step 3: Rewire your brain

Now that you have a greater awareness of how your inner thoughts may be skewed, it's time to rewire your brain and learn a new approach. Look at the list of thoughts you have already written down, reword them into kinder and more supportive ones.

Example 1

- "How can I be so stupid! I really stuffed that up. I can't believe I stuffed up my presentation. They probably thought I was an idiot, and now my credibility is shot."
- Alternative: "I can do better than that. I'll prepare and rehearse more next time. I think I should get some public speaking training because this has happened before. It can only be better for my career."

Example 2

- "There's no way in hell that I'm going to be able to get through all that work in one week! It's totally impossible! Who do they think I am?"
- Alternative: "There is a lot to do, but let me take it one day at a time. Perhaps writing a list of the priorities will help me focus on which tasks to complete first. Maybe I can talk to someone else in the team who could give me their perspective and help."

Example 3

- "This positive self-talk stuff is stupid. This is the way I've always been, and I can't change. Being hard on myself is how I do life."
- Alternative: "There is a lot of research that shows that thinking more positively can improve my mood, emotions and how I relate to the world. What can I lose by giving it a go?"

No Downside

Silencing your inner critic and learning how to have a positive, productive and affirmative inner conversation has no downside. Some of us may find it easier than others to adopt positive self-talk. However, if we give it a go and ultimately master this way of thinking and being, we will not only reduce our stress levels but significantly bolster our self-esteem. So what do you have to lose?

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