

SELF-TALK

-The key to better mental health

Have you ever stopped to think about the running dialogue you have going on in your head? Oh, come on, you know what I mean, we all talk to ourselves, admit it! Internal dialogue – self-talk – that is usually what it is called. So, why is it important? This internal dialogue or self-talk can actually shape your life. It impacts your beliefs, attitudes, emotions and actions. Sometimes just the use of a specific word or phrase can dictate a negative or positive outcome.

For example, how about the word “should”? How many of you “should” yourselves into a state of paralysis, becoming so burdened with the “shoulds” in your life that you are unable to act?

I should:

- Spend more time with my family...
- Work harder...
- Clean the house ...
- Do my homework
- Diet/lose weight...
- Stop smoking/drinking...
- Work out/exercise...
- And on and on...

Or use the phrase “have to” or “ought to”

Think how you react to someone who points a finger in your face and tells you that you “have to” do something, that you “should” act, think or feel in a certain way? It is a command, you are given no choice and no way out, you are trapped - backed into a corner – what do you do? Most folks in this situation just give up and do nothing or they rebel and do just the opposite. None of us likes to be backed into a corner, not by anyone else and not even by ourselves.

Some people may cave in and feel trapped in the endless circle of should, have to, ought to, must, and end up feeling depressed, hopeless and helpless. They may sit in front of the TV doing nothing and then having all their unpleasant feelings compounded because nothing got done. Other people react with anger because they feel trapped or cornered and their way to deal with it this to fight against themselves and take it out on others.

Now, just for an experiment in each situation when your self-talk is saying “I should, have to, ought to, must do, etc, try substituting the word **CHOOSE** – “I choose to” because really in each situation you do have a choice. You can choose to go to work or not, there are serious consequences either way but it is still a choice. The same is true in cleaning/ fixing up the house, smoking, dieting, doing homework, etc. Try this for a few weeks and see how you feel.

Another thing to try is substituting different phrases, ones that are less emotionally intense or are emotionally neutral. If you find you tend to use phrases like “this is awful”, “it’s terrible”, “I can’t stand it”, “I’ll never be able to...”, you may want to try words that carry less emotional weight. Instead of the phrases used above, how about substituting “this is unfortunate” or “this is uncomfortable” or even “this is difficult for me”. When we catastrophize, (make a mountain out of a molehill), a situation it will decrease our self confidence and self esteem and can cause anxiety and depression.

We have long understood that words carry emotional weight and we can readily see how they impact other people. However, we rarely stop to think of the impact of self-talk on ourselves. If a friend talked to you the way you talk to yourself that person wouldn’t be a friend for very long. Try treating yourself as you would a good friend. Be respectful and encouraging in your self-talk rather than negative and abusive. Start by substituting that one little word, choose, in your inner dialogue and try being a little kinder to yourself, give yourself a break and see what happens.

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