

Stop Beating Yourself Up! Breaking the Habit of Negative Self-Talk

Many who fear criticism and disapproval at the same time subject themselves to a constant stream of “negative self-talk” which undermines self-esteem and personal effectiveness. Such a persistently harsh, critical attitude toward oneself is often related to family-of-origin dynamics. For example, parents might project their own insecurities on their children to manage uncomfortable, sometimes intolerable, feelings and cognitions. Misperceiving the child’s emotions and behaviors as a negative reflection on THEM, the critical parent thus tries to exert control through relentless criticism or other harsh discipline. Though perhaps trying to instill important values or protect against social rejection, they might fail to recognize the long-term emotional costs and potential damage to the parent-child relationship.

In other situations, difficult family circumstances like untreated addictions create a chaotic, unpredictable environment where children must suppress negative emotions and otherwise deny their own needs. Poverty and internalized discrimination can also foment critical parenting, especially where adults try to compensate through a perfectionistic focus on appearances.

Negative self-talk can take many forms, including:

- put-downs and name-calling, e.g., “You’re such a loser”
- demeaning messages, e.g., “...who do you think you are to ask for this extra consideration?”
- deriding your own good efforts, motivations and goals – often by only focusing on the negative, e.g., assuming that your work product holds no value if disregarded by management
- dissecting each interpersonal interaction for evidence of how you might have looked stupid or somehow offended the other person
- discounting any possibility that others could like you or think well of you, e.g., assuming you only get complimented out of politeness
- hopeless and discouraging messages about everything you attempt, e.g., “This relationship will bomb like all the rest”; “You will never be good enough.”

Ironically, some people derive comfort from beating themselves up. Growing up in a family with little emotional support or affection, a parent’s criticism might have been the only attention you got. While the criticism feels bad, it might also imply that the parent is trying to help you, with children sometimes told that punitive responses are “for their own good”. Furthermore, adopting a parent’s critical stance can create some illusion of closeness via identification - their actual lack of emotional availability notwithstanding.

Obsessing and tormenting oneself can also be a defense against profound anger, grief or disappointment. This is particularly so for those who cannot acknowledge the negative impact of a caregiver’s rejecting or abandoning behavior. Turning the anger against oneself protects your image of the parent, essentially implying that any emotional abuse or neglect was warranted and justified.

To a large extent, negative self-talk can become a negatively reinforced habit. This means the sense of relief which comes when expected failure/rejection does not materialize paradoxically bring more denigration. Relatedly, self-blaming attributions can provide a sense of mastery over bad feelings (e.g., shame, disappointment) despite knowing “intellectually” that this is unhelpful and undeserved.

So how do you break the habit of negative self-talk? First, it’s important to identify it as a problem and recognize the ways it hurts you, for example: making you anxious or depressed; destroying your confidence; creating fear and indecisiveness (“paralysis”) so you can’t take appropriate, moderate risks; killing creativity and initiative; and making you seem insecure to others and possibly more vulnerable to mistreatment.

If you have severe or longstanding problems with anxiety or depression, it is important to consult a mental health professional for more comprehensive assessment. Negative self-talk can be a by-product of these psychological conditions – e.g., feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness – and also exacerbates them when going unchecked. Self-help books on cognitive therapy can help you identify the “irrational assumptions” that often underlie negative self-talk, such as believing that everyone must like and approve of you. And it can be helpful to keep a log of the negative messages you give yourself, noting the circumstances (Sleep deprived? Interacting with hostile persons?) and refuting each message with a more rational and self-affirming one.

Finally, be proactive about treating yourself well, both physically and emotionally. Self-neglect sends a bad message about your worth and the validity of your needs, sometimes triggering old feeling of hurt and despair that manifest as negative self-talk. Work toward becoming a “good parent” to yourself, ensuring that you get adequate sleep, regular meals, and enjoyable physical activity. Expand your support network, or at least practice relying more on the people already in your life (*and don’t assume you’re burdening them by talking about your feelings!*). Learn to take in compliments and positive feedback - and also to give yourself validating and affirming messages. If you need help getting started with this last suggestion, below is a little exercise....

List three of your positive qualities:

List one of your proudest accomplishments: _____

List one helpful or altruistic thing you’ve done for another person, group or cause:

List one caring or highly responsible thing you do on a regular basis: _____

Write down one thing you want for yourself: _____, and then assert, “I deserve to pursue this!”