The Role of Self Talk and Anxiety

Part 4 of the “Don’t Panic! Coping With Anxiety” workshop series.

Adapted from the book “The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook by Edmund J. Bourne

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The relationship between self-talk and feelings…

- It is what we say to ourselves in response to a particular situation that mainly determines our **mood** and **feelings**.

- This self-talk is often automatic and so we don’t notice it and believe that it is the external situation that ‘makes’ us feel the way we do. In other words:

  ![Diagram]
  
  External event → Our interpretation of the event and self-talk → Our feelings and reactions
So, this means that:

- We are **responsible** for our thoughts and feelings.

- External events or other people don’t **make** us feel bad per se – it is the way we interpret them that results in us feeling bad/anxious.

- But this does not mean we should blame ourselves either!

- Instead, it is about **empowering** yourself by **accepting** this responsibility and thereby have mastery over your life.

- We can challenge our way of interpreting the world and the way we speak to ourselves to directly influence our moods and feelings.
The relationship between anxiety and self-talk

- Anxiety can easily and quickly be generated by repeatedly making statements to yourself that begin “what if”, which make you anticipate several scary scenarios that make you want to avoid the situation all together.

- The first step is noticing **when** you do this, and the next step is to **counter** these negative ‘what-if’ statements with self-supporting statements that reinforce your ability to cope.
Self-defeating self talk has the following features:

- It is automatic and subtle
- It often appears in ‘telegraphic’ form (e.g. “Oh no”)
- It is typically irrational but almost always sounds like the truth
- It perpetuates avoidance
- It can initiate or aggravate a panic attack
- It is a series of bad habits, you have learned to think this way
Types of negative self-talk

Not all self-talk is the same, there are different types that come from different parts of ourselves, from different “sub-personalities”.

The sub-personality types that are prominent in people who are prone to anxiety are:

- The **Worrier**
- The **Critic**
- The **Victim**
- The **Perfectionist**
The Worrier (Promotes Anxiety)

- Creates anxiety by imagining the **worst-case scenario** (disaster or catastrophe) when you imagine confronting something that you fear.
- Overestimates the odds of something bad or embarrassing happening,
- Creates grandiose images of potential failure or catastrophe.
- It is always looking out for the slightest evidence of trouble.

**Favourite expression:** “What if”

**Examples:** “What if I panic and lose control of myself?”, “What if they see me shaking and I stammer in my speech?”, “What if I never get over my anxiety?”, “What if I panic when I’m alone and no one can help me?”
The Critic (Promotes Low Self-Esteem)

- Constantly judges and evaluates you, pointing out your flaws and limitations.
- It jumps on any mistakes you make and tells you that you are a failure.
- It generates anxiety by putting you down for not being able to handle your anxiety and likes to compare you with others, usually seeing them come out favourably.
- It tends to ignore your positive qualities and emphasises your weaknesses/inadequacies.

**Favourite expression:** “You’re pathetic”, “That was stupid”

**Examples:** Any negative labels that you might think of “You’re stupid”, “Can’t you ever get it right?”, “Why are you always this way?”, “Look how capable ____ is”, “You could have done better.”
The Victim (Promotes Depression)

- Makes you feel helpless/hopeless.
- It generates anxiety by telling you that you are not making any progress, that it is too hard for you to ever recover.
- It also generates depression, believing that there is something inherently wrong with you, that you are defective or unworthy.
- It places unsurmountable obstacles between you and your goals.
- It bemoans, complains, and regrets things as they are at present and believes that nothing will ever change.

**Favourite expression:** “I can’t”, “This will never change”

**Examples:** “What’s the point of trying, I’ll never be able to do that”, “I feel too drained today, why bother?”, “If I had some initiative I might have been able to do it but it is too late now”.

The Perfectionist (Promotes Chronic Stress & Burnout)

- Generates anxiety by telling you that your efforts aren’t good enough, that you **should** be working harder, and **always** be in control, competent and pleasing.

- It is the part of you that expects perfection and is intolerant of mistakes or setbacks.

- It tends to convince you that your self-worth depends on external things such as vocational achievement, money and status, acceptance by others, being loved or an ability to always be nice to others no matter what they do.

- It doesn’t recognise your strengths or **inherent self-worth** (the fact that being a human-being means you have worth and value) and pushes you to burnout, ignoring warning signs from your body.

**Favourite expression:** “I should”, “I have to”, “I must”

**Examples:** “I should always be on top of things”, “I should always be considerate and unselfish”, “I should always be pleasant and nice”, “I have to (get this job, get these grades, receive approval etc) or I’m not worth much”
What are your sub-personalities telling you?

The goal of this exercise is to help you discover which sub-personality is having the greatest impact on you and your anxiety as well as the specific self-talk that it is generating. Think about what your sub-personality is saying to you in each of these situations:

- **Work/school** (or any ‘performance’ situation)
- **Personal relationships** (with partner, family, friends)
- **Anxiety symptoms** (the times when you experience anxiety symptoms)
- **Phobic situations** (either in advance of facing a fearful situation or while actually confronting the fearful situation)
Here are some examples for each sub-personality

THE WORRIER

Work/school: “What if my boss finds out about my anxiety? I’ll be fired”

Relationships: “What if my partner leaves me?”

Anxiety symptoms: “What if they see me panic and think I’m weird?”

Phobic situation: “What if I have an accident when I drive on a freeway?”

THE CRITIC

Work/school: “I am incompetent because of my condition”

Relationships: “I’m a burden to my partner”

Anxiety symptoms: “I’m such a weakling - I fall apart when I panic”

Phobic situation: “Everybody else can drive - I feel like a loser”

THE VICTIM

Work/school: “My situation is hopeless - sooner or later I will fail”

Relationships: “My parents messed me up” or “I can’t make it without my partner”

Anxiety symptoms: “I’ll never get over my anxiety - there must be something very wrong with me”

Phobic situation: “It is useless studying, my anxiety will never let me get through my exams”

THE PERFECTIONIST

Work/school: “I should be able to study like everybody else - being anxious is no excuse”

Relationships: “I shouldn’t need to depend on anyone”

Anxiety symptoms: “I have to be able to stop these thoughts from going through my mind”

Phobic situation: “I have to learn to drive like everyone else”
Monitoring your thoughts

Monitor what your sub-personalities are telling you for a week, especially during those times when you are feeling **anxious, depressed, self-critical, ashamed** or otherwise **upset**.

Try to find out what is behind the feelings you are experiencing - recognise that you feel scared, but think about **what the thoughts were** that led you to feel scared.
Countering negative self-talk

- Countering involves writing down and rehearsing positive statements which directly refute or invalidate your negative self-talk.

- This will take some practice as it will take conscious thought while negative thoughts come easily and automatically.

- Start by noticing your negative self-talk and then counter it with positive statements and you’ll begin to turn your thinking around.

- Eventually you can change how you think and feel on a more consistent basis.
How do you make positive self statements if you don’t believe them?

You may be strongly attached to your negative self-talk, believing it to be true and it will be hard to give up the habit of a lifetime.

One way to give positive self-statements more validity and weaken the hold of negative self-statements is to ask rational questions about your negative self-talk:

1. What is the evidence for this?
2. Is this always true?
3. Has this been true in the past?
4. What are the odds of this really happening or being true?
5. What is the very worst that could happen? What is so bad about that? What would I do if the worst did happen?
6. Am I looking at the whole picture?
7. Am I being fully objective?

Use these questions to evaluate the validity of what you are telling yourself. You will most likely discredit these negative self-statements, and then you will be ready to counter with positive, self-supportive statements.
Two examples of countering negative self-talk

**EXAMPLE ONE:**

**Negative self statement:** (The Worrier) “What if I have a heart attack the next time I panic?”

**Questioning:** “What is the evidence that panic attacks cause heart attacks?”

**Answer:** There is no evidence. Panic symptoms are just the physical symptoms of arousal and not heart disease.

**Counterstatement:** “A panic attack, however uncomfortable, is not dangerous to my heart. I can let panic rise, fall, and pass and my heart will be fine.”

**EXAMPLE TWO**

**Negative self statement:** (The Perfectionist) “I have to get high distinctions for all my subjects or I will be devastated”

**Questioning:** “Am I being fully objective? Is it absolutely true that high distinctions are absolutely necessary for my well-being? What is the worst that could happen?”

**Answer:** I could still survive and get good marks even if I don’t get all high distinctions.

**Counterstatement:** “I am willing to go forward with my life and my studies regardless of whether I get all high distinctions or not.”
Rules for writing positive counter-statements

Avoid negatives: telling yourself something is not likely to happen actually generates more anxiety.

Keep counterstatements in the present tense: or, if that doesn’t feel believable, try “I am willing to..” or “I am learning to..”

Where possible, keep counterstatements in the first person

Have some belief in your positive self-talk: you may need to challenge your negative thoughts before you can begin to believe a positive statement
Some examples:

**The worrier:** Instead of ‘what if’, try ‘So what”, “I can handle this”, “I can be anxious and still do this”

**The critic:** Instead of putting yourself down, say “I’m okay the way I am” or “I’m lovable and capable”, or “I’m a unique and creative person”, “I deserve the good things in life as much as anyone”, “I accept and believe in myself”, “I am worthy of the respect of others”

**The victim:** Instead of feeling hopeless, say “I don’t have to be all better by tomorrow”, “I can progress one step at a time”, “I acknowledge the progress I have made and will continue to improve”, “It’s never too late to change” and “I am willing to see the glass as half-full rather than half-empty”

**The perfectionist:** Instead of demanding perfection, try “It’s okay to make mistakes”, “life is too short to take too seriously”, “setbacks are part of my recovery and are a learning process”
Working with Counter-Statements

- Following the counter-statement rule, you can now try countering the negative self-statements that you identified in the previous exercise.

- Try reading through these positive counter-statements slowly and carefully for a couple of minutes each day for at least two weeks. See if you can feel some conviction about their truth as this will help to integrate them more.

- Make copies of your counterstatements and stick them up in conspicuous places.

- Put your counterstatements on tape, leaving 5 seconds between each statement. Try a relaxation exercise and then listen to the tape, as you will be more receptive.
Changing self talk about specific fears/phobias

Fears and phobias are perpetuated by:

1) **Sensitisation**: occurs when you experience anxiety in a certain context and in your mind, you associate the context with the anxiety. After a while, just thinking of that context can bring on anxiety.

2) **Avoidance**: which is rewarding at first, but ultimately makes the fear stronger because it stops you learning that you can handle situations you are afraid of.

3) **Negative, distorted self-talk**: keeps you afraid and undermines your confidence about recovering
The three basic distortions of unconstructive self-talk:

1. **Overestimating a negative outcome**: mainly ‘what if’ statements that *overestimate* the chance of something bad happening “what if I fail and have to drop out of my course?”

2. **Catastrophising**: thinking that if a negative outcome did occur, it would be catastrophic, overwhelming and unmanageable “I couldn’t handle it”, “they’ll never forgive me”.

3. **Underestimating your ability to cope**: not recognising or acknowledging your ability to cope if a negative outcome did in fact occur, which is usually implicit in your catastrophic thoughts.
Refuting distorted thinking

It is important to realise that fear is the unreasonable **overestimation** of some threat, coupled with an **underestimation** of your ability to cope.

Ask yourself the following questions about your distorted thoughts to help you frame a counterstatement:

**Overestimating thoughts:** Viewing the situation objectively, what are the odds of a negative outcome actually occurring?

**Catastrophising thoughts:** If the worst did happen, is it actually true that I couldn’t handle it?

**Underestimating your ability to cope:** Identify and list the specific ways that you *could* cope if the worst happened, that is, plan some coping strategies that you could use.
Other types of cognitive distortions

There are some common distortions to thinking which can skew the way you perceive and evaluate yourself and the world outside:

- Overgeneralising
- Filtering
- Emotional Reasoning
- Should statements
Overgeneralising

- Involves assuming (usually falsely) that because you've had one bad experience that you will always have a bad experience in similar circumstances. In essence, you jump from one instance in the present to all instances in the future.

- Can be recognised by the use of words like never, always, all, every, none, no one, nobody, everyone, everybody or use of absolute statements that incorporate these words "No one would like me if they really knew me".

- There are three questions you can ask yourself that are useful to challenge overgeneralising distortions and help you develop a more balanced perspective:
  1. What is the evidence for this?
  2. What are the odds of this really happening or being true?
  3. Has this been true in the past?
Filtering

- Involves noticing only the **negative** aspect/s of a situation, ignoring any **positive** aspects. For example, focussing on setbacks and ignoring any progress that you’ve made.

- Filtering usually operates when you It is as if you were wearing a special pair of glasses which filter out anything positive.

- You can recognise filtering if you use words that are globally negative in scope like worthless, pointless, hopeless, stupid, failure, dangerous and unfair.

- There are two questions you can ask yourself that are useful to challenge filtering distortions:
  1. Am I looking at the whole picture (or, am I taking both sides of this into account?)
  2. Are there positive aspects to this situation (person, object) that I'm ignoring?
Emotional Reasoning

- Is the tendency to judge/evaluate something illogically, totally on the basis of your feelings. To infer that because you feel a certain way means you are a certain way is as illogical as inferring from one rainy day that the sun never shines!

- An indication of emotional reasoning is when you make decisions totally on impulse without the mediation of reasoning - be wary of making such snap judgements.

- There are three questions you can ask yourself that are useful to challenge emotional reasoning distortions:
  1. Am I going solely by my feelings?
  2. Am I looking at this objectively?
  3. What is the evidence that my judgement (based on feelings) is completely accurate?
Should statements

- Although using 'should' is sometimes appropriate (I should look both ways when crossing the road!), it is problematic when attached to **unreasonably** high expectations (I should always be pleasing and cheerful in spite of my feelings, or I should be as good or better than everyone else otherwise I am worthless).

- Guaranteed to keep you anxious and tense as well as lowering your self-confidence.

- There are four questions to help you assess whether your should statements are healthy and appropriate:
  1. Is the standard flexible? In other words, does it allow for exceptions, or is it rigid and global with no exceptions?
  2. Is the standard based on your own experience or is it 'inherited', without you ever having questioned it, from your parents?
  3. Is the standard realistic (does it take into account all of the consequences of applying it?), or is it based on an arbitrary sense of rightness, regardless of the personal consequences?
  4. Is the standard life-enhancing (does it acknowledge your needs and feelings?) or is it life restricting (ignoring your needs and feelings?)
General guidelines for countering cognitive distortions

- Remember that it took years of repetition and practice to produce the bad habits of negative and limiting self-talk, so it will therefore also take repetition and practice to learn more constructive and helpful ways of thinking.
Step One: Notice

Catch yourself in the act of engaging in negative self-talk. Notice when you do it most and when it gets worse. Times to look out for are:

- Whenever you have anxiety symptoms,
- Whenever you anticipate having to face a task that you perceive is difficult
- Whenever you perceive you've made a mistake
- Whenever you feel depressed or discouraged
- Whenever you feel angry at yourself or others
- Whenever you feel guilty, ashamed or embarrassed.
Step Two: Stop

Ask yourself any or all of these questions:

- "What am I telling myself that is making me feel this way?"
- "Do I really want to do this to myself?"
- "Do I really want to stay upset?"

If the answer to these last two questions is 'no', then proceed to step 3.

If “yes”, then it may be that you are experiencing strong feelings that you may need to acknowledge and allow yourself to express first. If there is no one to share them with, try writing them in a journal.

Alternatively, you may answer “yes” because you have a strong need to keep everything under control and believe that staying tense and vigilant helps you maintain that control. Unfortunately, focusing on the perceived danger of a situation has the opposite effect! To break out of this vicious cycle, try a deep relaxation exercise.
Step Three: Relax

- Disrupt your train of negative thoughts by taking some deep abdominal breaths or using some method of distraction.

- The point is to let go, slow yourself down and relax. It is only then that you can identify the negative self-talk that is going on behind your racing thoughts and anxiety.

- Relax for as long as you need to in order to identify what you've been telling yourself.
Step Four: Write down the negative self-talk

- Will help to clarify what specific statements you've made to yourself.
- Try to separate thought and feeling statements, for example there is likely to be a thought behind the feeling "I feel upset" or "I feel scared", which might be "I am stupid" or "I can't do this, this is unmanageable".
- Always try to work out what the thought is behind the feeling.
- Is it the worrier, the critic, the victim or the perfectionist?
- Also look for any cognitive distortions you are making - overestimating, catastrophising, overgeneralising, and filtering. This way you can identify which type you are most prone to use.

Step Five: Identify the type
Step Six: Answer or dispute negative self-talk

- Make positive, rational and self-supportive statements.
- Answer each negative statement with an opposing and positive statement.
- You may need to ask yourself some questions first to challenge negative talk before you can come up with counterstatements that feel good and that you can believe.
A short version to help you disrupt negative thoughts “on the spot”…

Follow these three steps whenever you want to disrupt a negative train of thought 'on the spot':

1. **Notice:** that you are engaging in negative self-talk.

2. **Stop:** Ask yourself "what am I telling myself to make me feel this way?", "do I really want to do this to myself?" and "Do I really want to stay upset?"

3. **Relax or distract:** Switch gears by slowing yourself down with some deep abdominal breathing, doing something physical or anything that will bring you out of your head and into your body. You might also try other distractions (reading, watching a movie, talking to someone on the phone) or a thought-stopping technique (shout "STOP" or "GET OUT", stomp your foot or snap a rubber band against your wrist to divert your mind).