

Halt Your Negative Self-Talk

Imagine that something has gone wrong in your life. Say the following aloud and put as much feeling into it as you can.

"This is a disaster. A complete disaster. I can't get through this."

Notice the feeling you get as you tell this to yourself. It won't be very strong, because it's only an exercise, but you can notice a certain emotional tone arise.

What is the feeling?

Now imagine that you said something different to yourself. Say it aloud:

"This is disappointing. I wish it hadn't happened. But I'll survive it."

Is there any difference in how you feel reading this relative to the last script? (Read both of them again if necessary.)

If so, why? It was the same situation, the same event. But in one case you told yourself that couldn't handle it. In the second case you told yourself the truth: that you weren't pleased by the way things had turned out, but that you would survive. Any difference in feeling was caused not by the situation, but by the message you sent yourself.

If you give yourself the same negative message over and over again, even if you don't mean it, you can come to believe it. Imagine that every time you make a minor mistake, you half-jokingly tell yourself *"I'm an idiot!"* After a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand repetitions, you may begin to feel truly inadequate. You have programmed yourself to believe a negative message.

Take a look at the list below. Do any of these statements sound like messages you give yourself repeatedly? Place a check mark beside any that you think you use a lot.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm an idiot. | <input type="checkbox"/> He's an idiot. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I never get anything right. | <input type="checkbox"/> They hate me. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I've screwed up again. | <input type="checkbox"/> Everything happens to me. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm so ugly. | <input type="checkbox"/> I might as well give up. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> It's all my fault. | <input type="checkbox"/> I wish I were dead. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I don't have what it takes. | <input type="checkbox"/> My life is a nightmare. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> No one cares for me. | <input type="checkbox"/> Nothing will ever work. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm all alone. | <input type="checkbox"/> This will finish me. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> They expect me to be a slave. | <input type="checkbox"/> It's hopeless. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My spouse is a butthead. | |

If you tell yourself any of these things often enough, you will begin to believe them, and feel the emotions that come with them. Chances are you have some of your own. Over the next day or two, try to listen for the negative messages you give yourself. Write them here:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Now: Imagine that you honestly believed the literal meaning of these statements. *“This is killing me.”* How would you feel? Would it help your mood or harm it?

In most cases these statements are exaggerations or outright lies. Try to catch yourself saying them – preferably *before* you say them. Then tell yourself the truth. Is it really killing you? If not, what is the truth? Respond to the lie.

“This is uncomfortable, but I will survive it.”

Your responses will probably sound weaker than the original statement. The reality is usually less extreme than the negative messages we tell ourselves.

Pick one of the statements you repeatedly give yourself. What would be a more accurate thing to say?

Memorize this replacement. This week, use it whenever you might normally give yourself the negative self-programming.

At first, the replacement message will seem silly or false. It may not help your emotional state at all. Fine. Keep using it. Eventually the truth in it will sink in, and the message will seem more natural.