



Conscious Self-Talk

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You live with an ever-present companion—you! You spend more time with yourself than with anyone else. In fact, you spend all your time with yourself. This internal companion talks to you continuously, virtually nonstop—even when you're sleeping! As a consequence, you have more influence over yourself and more ability to create your future than anyone else. This internal companion is you talking to you, inside your mind. You are the creator of your internal environment. You guide yourself, criticize yourself, give to or withhold from yourself, belittle or support yourself. The internal you feels like a distinctly different person speaking to you, but it is really you inside, talking to you. How you react to a worrisome situation is largely deter-

mined by what you tell yourself about it. Through this internal dialogue, you make decisions, set goals, feel happy or sad, relaxed or anxious, hopeful or lost.

Worrywarts talk to themselves in ways that leave them feeling anxious, afraid and inadequate. They talk to themselves in ways that magnify trivial mistakes, making a big fuss needlessly over picayune problems. Worrywarts have selective vision, they focus on FUD—Fear, Uncertainty and Doubt—in virtually every situation, keeping themselves in a constant state of anxiety and dread. Their “fuddy” self-talk creates a psychological environment that is toxic and taxing.

Smart worriers actively soothe themselves when they feel anxious, depressed or annoyed. This enables

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them to bounce back quickly from disappointments and setbacks. Their self-talk creates a psychological environment that is supportive and hopeful.

The way that you talk to yourself traps you in worrywarting. To break out, you must stop talking to yourself in ways that make you feel anxious, small and helpless, and start being supportive and encouraging in your self-talk. Psychologists call self-talk that is soothing and brings you back to balance “compassionate self-talk” and “the language of self-support.”

Talking to yourself compassionately can be learned. Like learning any new language, learning the language of self-support takes time, practice and dedication. Self-nurturing is not that hard, really. The key is to imagine how a good friend would talk to you, and then talk to yourself that way. The hard part is breaking “fuddy” self-talk habits and actually talking to yourself in a compassionate and self-supportive way.

IMAGINE WHAT A FRIEND WOULD SAY

Think of a worry you’ve been dwelling on lately. For this practice, pick an easy worry, not something that is terribly distressing, just something that has been mildly nagging. For a few moments, listen to how you talk to yourself about this worry. Concentrate on what you say about the worrisome situation and how you say it. Notice the exact words you use. Write the worry out in your journal just the way you tell it to yourself. Label this “fuddy-talk.”

Imagine telling this worry to a dear friend. What would that friend say to be supportive and encouraging? What would your friend say to soothe you and bring you back to balance? Pay attention to the words you imagine your friend would use, and how he or she would say them. Write down what your friend would say in your journal. Label this “friendly-talk.”

How does the way you imagine a friend would talk to you about the worry compare with how you actually talk to yourself about the worry? If you are like most worrywarts, you have a double standard—one for friends and one for yourself. The way you talked to yourself was probably harsh, judgmental and critical. You probably focused on the dire aspects of the worrisome situation and questioned your ability to handle it. How did you talk to yourself when you imagined you were a friend talking to you about the worrisome situation? You were probably comforting and supportive when talking to yourself the way a friend would. You probably soothed yourself by telling yourself that things are not as bad as you make them out to be and pointing out how you have the ability to meet this challenge.

SWITCH TO FRIENDLY SELF-TALK

Try this. Return to the worry you used in the earlier exercise and think about it as you normally do. When you hear the fuddy self-talk say, “STOP!” very loudly inside your head and imagine seeing a stop sign in your mind. Then *immediately switch* to friendly self-talk and say the supportive statement you wrote in your journal.

Expect fuddy-talk to sneak back in. Don’t berate yourself for slipping. Instead when it does, yell “Stop!” imagine the stop sign again, and immediately switch to friendly-talk again. The fuddy-talk will come back again and again. That’s the way the mind works. Each time it does, yell “Stop!” silently to yourself, imagine the stop sign, and pull yourself back to friendly-talk.

THE MIND IS LIKE A WILD ELEPHANT

The Seeker and Shaman Woman were reviewing the events of the day. “I know that worrying makes my life hell, Shaman Woman,” said the Seeker. “But why can I

not control my mind?"

"Your mind is like a wild elephant that you must master," said the Shaman as she handed the Seeker his tea. "When you tether the elephant, it flaps its ears, slaps its tail, and tries to run away."

"That's just what my mind does. It runs wild whenever I try to control it," the Seeker said excitedly. "What should I do when it runs away, Shaman Woman?"

"Don't scold the elephant for running," answered the Shaman. "Simply grab the chain and pull it back. Again and again the elephant will run away—and again and again you must pull it back. Eventually, the elephant will be tamed when it learns that you are the master."

"Then will my wild mind obey me?" the Seeker asked.

"Then you will have great power," the Shaman replied, "because, once tamed, both elephants and minds will work for you."

It takes a long time to master your wild mind, especially if it is used to running on, out of control. Don't get angry at yourself for running back to the worry. Be patient with your wild mind as you firmly pull your attention back to friendly-talk.

BE SUPPORTIVE AND ENCOURAGING

Worrywarts fuss over what's wrong and what's missing. There is always something to worry about because you can always find fault with something, no matter how good it is. Constant criticism is demotivating and beats you down. Sadly, this is precisely what worrywarts do to themselves with their fuddy self-talk; they punish and hurt themselves.

A supportive friend focuses on the positive and what's working. A friend builds you up by pointing out progress and what you've done right. This fosters optimism and positive feelings. Talk to yourself the way a friend would. Use friendly self-talk to give yourself credit for steps you have taken to become a smart worrier. Avoid judging your progress or the degree of your efforts—that's fuddy self-talk. Instead, praise your efforts and improvement, even when they are small. Give yourself credit and encourage yourself with friendly self-talk. Develop a habit of actively challenging worrisome thoughts and assume a critical stance

toward their assumptions in a friendly way. Remind yourself that you are a valuable and lovable person even if you don't do everything perfectly.

PRACTICE FRIENDLY SELF-TALK

There will always be difficulties, potential for accidents, and risk of failure. How you think about life's perils is really the change point. *You can learn another way to think*—another way of talking to yourself. The way to begin this process of transforming yourself into a smart worrier is by catching when you talk to yourself in a fuddy way and countering those negative, irrational and illogical views with friendly-talk.

YOU CAN LEARN TO TALK MORE FRIENDLY TO YOURSELF

You can break free of worrywarting and learn to worry smart. You are not sick, and there is nothing to get over. It's just a matter of learning another way to talk to yourself. Worrywarting is a bad habit—one that took years to learn. Change will not take place spontaneously. It will take time and effort to learn to talk in a friendly way to yourself. Don't be so demanding and hard on yourself. Just remember: talk to yourself the way a supportive friend would.

Be patient with yourself because it takes many weeks, months, even years to refute your fuddy self-talk. Over many years, you've evolved a personal mythology that governs your perceptions, your feelings and your actions. But it is a mythology—a belief system. The way you talk to yourself is a kind of ongoing self-indoctrination. Replacing the fuddy self-talk with friendly self-talk feels uncomfortable at first—just the way any new behavior does when you're breaking an entrenched habit. The irony is that most of the time the friendly self-talk is far more accurate than is the worry. Yet, you've listened to the fuddy self-talk so long that it seems true because it is so familiar. But fuddy thinking and worrywarting are self-limiting mental habits—habits you can change. •

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