

**Session 9: Self-Talk**

People often tell me that they set high standards for themselves and are hard on themselves when they don’t measure up. They often share this information with pride, like it’s a commendable behavior. I always feel badly for them when I hear this because they don’t understand how their brain works and they are getting in their own way. Chances are pretty good that the things they are saying to themselves when they don’t measure up to their self-imposed standards are much harsher than the things they would ever say to a friend, or a friend would ever say to them.

 Your brain lights up the same way for a real event and a vivid picture of the event. This negative, critical self-talk is triggering the same fight or flight response it would if someone else was attacking you. Cortisol and adrenaline are flooding your body and with it, two important things are happening. Cortisol is slowing down your ability to process information and solve problems and it is also making you hyper-sensitive to other potential threats. It takes awhile for your body to clear cortisol so even after the first wave of threat has passed and the fight or flight has response has eased, there is a good chance something else will trigger it again. The result is, your cognitive processing ability can be impaired for long periods of time. You just can’t perform at your best under this condition which makes it even harder to measure up to the standards you have set. You are in a downward spiral of your own making.

It’s okay to set standards and expectations for yourself. In fact, it’s a good thing to push yourself out of your comfort zone and to reach for increasingly higher levels of performance. Punishing yourself with criticism and negative self-talk when your efforts are not immediately successful, however, is counterproductive. What is needed is self-compassion, not punishment.

Instead of being annoyed or frustrated with yourself for not meeting a self-imposed standard, you might remember the “not yet” approach that Dr. Dweck suggests. Instead of judging yourself as a failure, you might instead accept that you aren’t quite where you wanted to be but with continued effort, you will get there. This kind of thinking will motivate you to keep going instead of shutting you down.

We engage in a constant stream of chatter. In fact, our mind is designed to be constantly on and, when we are not actively engaged in a task, other thoughts pop up reminding you of things you need to do, ruminating on past hurts, disappointments, frustrations, and failures, or time traveling to the future, worrying about what might happen. Most of this chatter is negative because our ancestors’ survival depending on being sensitive to potential threat. Paying attention to changes in their environment that might harm them allowed them to take proactive steps to protect themselves and live long enough to pass along their genes. We have inherited this negative bias and, unless we actively work against it to focus on the positive, we are suffering with all the problems that the presence of chronic cortisol presents. In addition to the compromised cognitive processing, I discussed earlier, chronic cortisol will contribute to depression, illness, poor memory, impaired learning, damaged relationships, and on and on.

Our minds are wired to go to the dark side but we don’t have to be victims of this bias. We can choose to actively challenge this negative self-talk. The first step is to notice when we are being harsh with ourselves or being cynical or pessimistic. When we do, we can challenge that thinking and replacing it with more optimistic thoughts. Years ago, Saturday Night Live featured a character, Stuart Smiley, who would sit in front of a mirror and repeat out loud, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me.” SNL was making fun of a growing trend towards self-affirmations but, now that we have the kind of technology that allows us to see what is going on in our brains when we are thinking, it turns out that these self-affirmations are quite powerful. When you repeat a positive thought to yourself, you not only turn down the production of cortisol, you increase the production of the happy chemicals that enhance your ability to process information and to feel safer, happier, and more connected to others.

There are a few things to consider if you want to use self-affirmations to feel better and to create energy. First, it needs to be practiced several times a day because, without any effort on your part, negative thoughts are flooding your brain. It will take a deliberate effort to counter this continued stream of negativity. Creating a practice habit, using one of the strategies discussed last week, can help with that. Second, the self-affirmation will be stronger if it begins with an “I am…” statement. Finally, it needs to be believable or that little voice in your head will argue with it and provide examples of situations in which you are not the “I am…” you are describing in your self-affirmation. For example, you can’t say “I am a powerful and fast runner” when you know you were one of the last runners to finish a race. Instead, you might say, “I am committed to pushing myself and every day I am getting better and better.”

Another way to counter your negativity bias is to do something your grandmother may have told you to do, count your blessings. It turns out that when we take time to focus on being grateful for the good things in our lives, we start noticing more of them. It’s like when you go to buy a car and you are intrigued by a new color or model in the showroom. Then, on your way home, you begin noticing cars with that same color or are that new model. They were around you before, but you just didn’t see them. Once you became aware of them at the dealership, you can’t help but see them elsewhere. Taking time to inventory your blessings, those little things that right or bring you pleasure, moves your focus away from the negative things and puts a spotlight on the happy, optimistic events. Suddenly you are appreciating the hot coffee in the morning or the fact that you hit three green lights on your way to work.

Awareness of what is right in your world stimulates that chemical factory in your brain to produce the positive neurotransmitters and hormones that make life more enjoyable.

Being your own best friend and showing yourself some self-compassion when you don’t achieve a standard, practicing self-affirmations, or documenting the little things you are grateful for are all great ways of ensuring that you have the right chemistry in your brain to perform at your best and to feel a sense of well-being. You deserve to feel good!