

Self-Talk—What are you telling yourself?

People often look a bit puzzled when I first ask, “What are you telling yourself about that situation?” Eventually, we may even laugh together at how often I ask that question. However, it’s a critical question to explore when using Cognitive Therapy to treat depression, anger, and other types of emotional distress. Becoming aware of self-talk may be the first step in helping one overcome depression and anger.

Proverbs 23:7 says that our thinking or reasoning determines who we are. We all have self-talk. We tell ourselves “something” about each of our life experiences. We attach meaning and interpret what others say, how they respond, and how they interact with us. Over time we develop automatic “self-talk” about people, ourselves, places, events, our past, our future, and daily interactions with the world around us.

Sometimes self-talk or the meaning that we attach to life’s events can become distorted and inferences are made that cannot be supported by the evidence. Or one may take a specific detail out of context and form faulty conclusions.

Often times, depression and anger results from our self-talk becoming:

1. Distorted—making inferences or interpretations that cannot be supported by the evidence.
2. Selective abstractions—taking a detail out of context, which leads to a faulty conclusion.
3. Over generalized—taking one or two incidents and applying broadly to unrelated situations.
4. Personalized—attributing external events to oneself without evidence of a causal connection.
5. Dichotomous—categorizing experiences into 1 or 2 extremes, all or nothing type thinking.
6. Cognitive Triad—forming a negative view of the world, self, and the future.

The goal of the cognitive therapist is to help people become aware of their self-talk and coach them on how to replace absolute/automatic thinking with deliberate thinking based on evidence. By identifying the automatic depressing thoughts when they occur and challenging them, people can begin to modify their negative thinking patterns.

One way to overcome anger or depression is increase our awareness of the negative thoughts and use them as a cue for taking action. When the mood changes for the worse, look back and identify what was running through your mind at that moment. The best way to become aware of negative thoughts is to write them down as soon as they occur. Once aware of the negative thoughts, evaluate the thoughts and look for more helpful and realistic alternatives.

There are four main questions you can use to help find answers to negative thoughts.

1. What is the evidence? What do the facts say about the situation?
2. What alternative views are there?
3. What is the effect of thinking the way you do?
4. What thinking errors are you making?

For more information about “self-talk” or if you believe that you might need help overcoming negative “self-talk” you may contact a counselor at The Peacemaker Center.

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