

Dealing with negative self-talk



Dr Gareth Furber

This is the companion worksheet to the following blog post

<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/07/30/two-methods-dealing-negative-self-talk/>

A quick primer on thoughts/beliefs and their role in our lives

Our brains are constantly generating thoughts. They pop up in our minds as images, memories, verbal statements, sound of our own voice, the words of others.

Those thoughts vary in their usefulness and helpfulness. Some are excellent. That essay you got a Distinction on involved you turning some of the better thoughts you have into words that were pleasing to your lecturer.

Other thoughts are not so great – particularly those that are unkind and highly critical of their owner (we call this negative self-talk).

Thoughts can reflect deeply held beliefs that we hold, or be like an echo, simply repeating after being heard multiple times.

Regardless of their origin, your job as a responsible brain owner is try and sift through them and keep the good ones and let the others ‘through to the keeper’ (sorry for Australian slang).

The following two techniques can be useful when confronted with repeated and negative self-talk, the kind that demotivates and demoralises us and holds us back from achieving our potential.

“you’re stupid”

“no-one loves you”

“you’ll never be happy”

“you should quit”


These take practice. The first time you use them they probably won’t work that well. But if you return to the process and practice it, you’ll get better at coping with negative self-talk.

It is unlikely that negative self-talk will ever completely disappear. Brains assess risk and reward and generate discouragement as part of their normal functioning. The goal isn’t to rid oneself of that negative inner voice. It is to learn when to listen to it, and when to let it chatter away unattended.

Cognitive Restructuring

Cognitive restructuring involves interrogating thoughts to determine their accuracy and usefulness. The goal is to modify the thought to become a more accurate and useful companion.

Thought/belief to be questioned



Interrogation questions

What is the evidence for this thought? What is the evidence against?

Am I basing the veracity of this thought on facts, or on feelings?

Is this thought an oversimplification, when in fact the truth is more complex?

Am I misinterpreting or cherry-picking the evidence for this thought?

Would other people agree with this thought?

Could I be exaggerating?

Might I be making a common cognitive error/distortion - <https://psychcentral.com/lib/15-common-cognitive-distortions#The-Most-Common-Cognitive-Distortions>

Is this thought just a regular brain fart, or do the facts support it?

Has this thought been passed to me by someone? If so, are they a reliable or trustworthy person?


Does this thought motivate me to make positive changes in my life?

Does this thought tell me how to solve my problems?

Does this thought help me cope with what is happening to me?

Is this thought what I would tell someone who was struggling with a similar issue?

The alternative, more realistic, more helpful thought



Cognitive Defusion

Stuck with a particularly obnoxious thought in your head, one that keeps convincing you it is true? It is time to develop a different relationship to that thought. Try one of the following cognitive defusion techniques.

<i>'The Mind'</i>	Treat "your mind" as an external event; almost as a separate person ("my mind is telling me all sorts of stupid shit today")
<i>Mental appreciation</i>	Thank your mind; show aesthetic appreciation for its products
<i>Cubbyholing</i>	Label private events as just some kind of background noise
<i>"I'm having the thought that ..."</i>	Use this phrase when reporting thoughts to identify exactly what they are
<i>Commitment to openness</i>	Commit to being open to whatever thoughts show up
<i>Just noticing</i>	Use the language of observation (e.g., noticing) when talking about thoughts ("I just noticed that the thought 'im stupid' just showed up")
<i>"Buying" thoughts</i>	Acknowledge when you are really entangled with a thought ("I've totally bought into this thought about being lazy")
<i>Physicalizing</i>	Label the physical dimensions of thoughts (e.g. size, colour, shape). Give it a physical form
<i>Put them out there</i>	Put the thought out in front of you (e.g. type on a computer)
<i>Open mindfulness</i>	Practise mindfulness with the goal of noticing thoughts as they arise and then letting them go like leaves on a stream
<i>Focused mindfulness</i>	Practice mindfulness where you focus on non-literal stuff like sight, sound, touch
<i>Sound it out</i>	Say difficult thoughts very, very slowly
<i>Sing it out</i>	Sing your thoughts
<i>Silly voices</i>	Say your thoughts in other voices -- a Donald Duck voice for example
<i>Polarities</i>	Say the opposite of the thought and then watch it fight back
<i>Think the opposite</i>	Engage in behaviour while trying to command the opposite (shows that thought doesn't have to drive behaviour)
<i>Your mind is not your friend</i>	Suppose your mind is mindless; who do you trust, your experience or your mind?
<i>Thoughts are not causes</i>	Ask yourself "Is it possible to think that thought, as a thought, AND do x?"
<i>Choose being right or choose being alive</i>	If you have to pay with one to play for the other, which do you choose?
<i>Monsters on the bus</i>	Treating scary private events as monsters on a bus you are driving, but where you have full control of the bus and where it is headed
<i>Feed the tiger</i>	Like feeding a tiger, you strengthen the impact of thoughts but dealing with them
<i>Who is in charge here?</i>	Treat thoughts as bullies; use colourful language to put them back in their place
<i>OK, you are right. Now what?</i>	Take the perspective that the thought is "right" but then go about determining a course of action that you want to take, as opposed to what it is telling you to take
<i>Mary had a little</i>	Say a common phrase and replace the final word with the troublesome thought
<i>Get off your butts</i>	Replace virtually all self-referential uses of "but" with "and"
<i>Find a free thought</i>	Just start learning to identify any free floating thought
<i>Do not think "x"</i>	Try to not think about 'pink elephants' after reading this. Shows how easily thoughts can be triggered and how trying to not have them has the opposite effect
<i>Find something that can't be evaluated</i>	Look around the room and notice that every single thing can be evaluated negatively
<i>Carry cards</i>	Write difficult thoughts on 3 x 5 cards and carry them with you
<i>Carry your keys</i>	Assign difficult thoughts and experiences to the keys in your pocket. Every time you handle the key, think the thought but then put them back in your pocket