

Your Thoughts Affect Your Emotions

More (Much More) Than You Think

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The unending dialog you have with yourself (called **self-talk**) is constantly judging events as good or bad, pleasurable or painful, safe or dangerous. These thoughts are rarely noticed, so they are hard to turn off — but are persistent and powerful enough to create intense emotions.

Self-talk usually consists of eight patterns of thinking:

1 Tunnel vision is looking at only one element of a situation to the exclusion of everything else.

You look through your own particular tunnel: If you are an anxious person, the theme is danger. You are preoccupied with the anticipation of dangerous situations, forever scanning the horizon for future pain. If you are a depressed individual, you will focus on your own failings and flaws. If you tend to be chronically angry, you will dwell on thoughts about the hurtful and deliberate behavior of others.

Memory can also be very selective. From your entire history and stock of experiences, you may pass over many or all positive experiences, and dwell only on the memories that leave you anxious, depressed or angry.

This "awfulizes" your thoughts by pulling negative events out of context and magnifying them, while ignoring all your good experiences — thus filling your awareness with depressing self-talk to the exclusion of all the good. A key phrase is "I can't stand it".

2 Black-and-white thinking perceives people and things as good or bad, wonderful or horrible, delightful or intolerable. Since your interpretations are extreme, your emotional reactions are also extreme — fluctuating from despair to elation, to rage, to ecstasy, to terror.

The greatest danger in this kind of thinking is its impact on how you judge yourself: You could believe that if you aren't perfect or brilliant, then you must be a failure or an imbecile. There's no room for mistakes.

3 Overgeneralization can lead to an increasingly restricted life. Some of the cue words that indicate you may be over-generalizing are *all, every, none, never, always, everybody and nobody*. You are over-generalizing when

you absolutely conclude: "I'll never be able to trust anyone again". Or "I will *always* be sad".

Another hallmark of over-generalization is the global label for persons, places and things you don't like: Somebody who is quiet on a date is a "dull clam". A city is "hell on earth". Television is an "evil, corrupting influence".

Each of these labels may contain a grain of truth, but it generalizes that grain into a global judgment.

4 *Mind reading* causes you to assume you know how others are feeling, and what motivates them: "He's just acting that way because he's jealous". "She's interested only in your money". "He's afraid to show he cares". As a mind reader, you also make assumptions about what people are thinking about you.

Mind reading depends on a process called projection. You imagine that people feel the same way you do, and react to things in the same way you do. If you are sensitive to rejection, you expect to be ignored. If you are very judgmental about particular habits and traits, you assume others are the same.

5 *Catastrophizing* starts with the words *what if*. You read a newspaper article describing a tragedy, or hear gossip about some disaster befalling an acquaintance, and you start wondering, "What if it happens to me? What if I break my leg skiing? What if they hijack my plane? What if my son starts taking drugs?" The list is endless. There are no limits to a really fertile catastrophic imagination.

6 *Magnifying* emphasizes things out of proportion to their actual importance. Small mistakes become tragic failures. Minor suggestions become scathing criticism. A slight backache becomes a ruptured disk. Minor setbacks become cause for despair. Slight obstacles become overwhelming barriers.

Words like impossible and overwhelming are magnifying terms that create a tone of doom and hysterical pessimism.

When you magnify, you view everything negative and difficult in your life through a telescope that enlarges your problems. But when you view your assets, such as your ability to cope and find solutions, you look through the wrong end of the telescope so that everything positive is minimized.

7 *Personalization* is the tendency to relate everything around you to yourself. You blame yourself when you see any sadness in your children; or

every time your spouse complains of being tired, you think that means he's tired of you.

Personalization also involves directly comparing yourself with other people: Sometimes the comparison is favorable to the other person: ("He plays a piano so much better than I".) And sometimes the comparison is actually favorable to you: ("He's dumb and I'm smart.") The opportunities for comparison never end. And even when the comparison is favorable, the underlying assumption is that you must continue to constantly measure yourself against others. If you come out better, you have a moment's relief. If you come up short, you feel diminished.

8 *Shoulds* operate from a list of inflexible rules about how you and other people should act. The rules are right and indisputable. Any deviation from your particular values or standards is "bad". As a result, you are often judging others, and finding fault. People irritate you. They don't act correctly, and they don't think correctly. They have unacceptable traits, habits and opinions that make them hard to tolerate.

Your shoulds are just as hard on you as they are on other people. You feel compelled to be or act in a certain way, but you never ask objectively if it really makes sense.

How to Stop Unwanted Thoughts

Listening to your self-talk is the first step in gaining control of unpleasant thoughts. Keep a Thought Journal for one week. You may find that concentrating on your self-talk makes you feel worse for a while, but keep working on it. It's normal to feel worse before you start to feel better. Most of your internal dialog is harmless. The thoughts that cause harm can be identified by the painful feelings they cause in your emotional life.

But as you listen to your self-talk, you will begin to question these thoughts, and even to disrupt them as they occur.

Stopping these thoughts takes time. They will return, and you will have to interrupt them again and again. The main effort is to stifle each thought just as it begins, and to concentrate on something else that you enjoy thinking about. In time the unwanted thoughts will return less and less often.

When an unwanted thought is underway, shout "Stop". Really belt it out. (You will need privacy when you begin this technique.) To accentuate the "Stop!" you can also clap your hands loudly or snap your fingers. Immediately empty your mind of the unpleasant thought, and switch to your favorite pleasant scene.

Enjoy all the pleasant sights, sounds, tastes and smells for about thirty seconds. If the unwanted thought returns before the thirty seconds are up, shout "Stop!" again.

If one pleasant scene "wears out", and no longer holds your attention, use another one. You should practice until your shouted "Stop!" readily stops your unwanted thought and imagery, and your pleasant scene is vivid and enjoyable, without little wisps of the obsessive thought sneaking back in.

When you have succeeded in interrupting your unwanted thoughts on several occasions with the shouted command, begin interrupting them with "Stop!" said in a normal voice.

After succeeding in stopping your thoughts by using your normal speaking voice, start interrupting thoughts with "Stop" in a whisper.

When the whisper is sufficient, use the sub-vocal command "Stop". Imagine hearing "Stop!" shouted inside your mind. Success at this stage means that you can stop thoughts alone or in public, without making a sound or calling attention to yourself.

If the sub-vocalized "Stop!" is not successful for you, you can use a different interrupter. You can pinch yourself or wear a rubber band around one wrist, and snap it to interrupt thought.