

Confronting Negative Inner Thoughts

Our inner thoughts are often described as self-talk—the ongoing conversation we have with ourselves throughout the day. Self-talk can include thoughts about what is happening, what something means, how we feel about ourselves, and what we expect might happen next.

Some self-talk is practical or encouraging. Other thoughts can become negative, exaggerated, or based more on our interpretation of a situation than on what we actually know. When this happens, our thoughts can influence how we feel and how we respond to what is happening around us.

Becoming Aware of Your Inner Thoughts

Negative self-talk can happen so quickly that we may not immediately recognize it as a thought. Something happens and our mind supplies an explanation:

“I messed that up.”

“They must be upset with me.”

“This isn't going to work.”

“I can't handle this.”

The thought may feel true simply because it appeared automatically. Becoming aware of self-talk gives us an opportunity to look at the thought rather than immediately accepting it as fact.

Strong emotions can sometimes provide a clue that it is time to check in with our thoughts. When you notice yourself feeling upset, worried, angry, discouraged, or stressed, consider asking yourself:

“What am I telling myself about this situation?”

Look at What You Know

Once you notice a negative thought, take a closer look at it.

Ask yourself what you actually know about the situation and what you may be assuming or interpreting.

Consider:

- What facts support this thought?
- Is there information that does not support it?
- Am I treating an assumption as though it were a fact?
- Am I reaching a conclusion before I have all the information?

The goal isn't to automatically replace every negative thought with a positive one. It is to see whether the thought accurately reflects the situation.

Consider Another Point of View

A situation can often be understood in more than one way. When you find yourself focused on one negative explanation, explore what else might be possible.

You might ask:

“Is there another way I could look at this?”

Consider what you might think if the same situation happened to someone you care about. You may notice possibilities that were difficult to see when you were caught up in your first reaction.

Looking for another perspective doesn't mean ignoring something difficult or pretending everything is okay. It simply makes room for explanations you may not have considered.

Put the Situation in Perspective

Negative self-talk can sometimes make a problem feel larger, more permanent, or more certain than it really is.

Take a moment to consider the situation as a whole.

What are you expecting to happen? How likely is that outcome? What other outcomes are possible? Will this situation still have the same importance later?

Putting something in perspective does not make a genuine problem disappear. It can help separate what is happening now from everything your thoughts are predicting might happen.

Ask Whether the Thought Is Helping You

A thought can also be examined by considering what happens when you continue thinking it.

Ask yourself:

“Is this thought helping me deal with the situation?”

If it isn't, consider what would be more useful right now. Perhaps there is something you can do about the problem, something you can learn from it, or a different way of thinking about it that helps you decide what to do next.

Choose a More Helpful Thought

Confronting negative self-talk doesn't require pretending that a difficult situation is easy or turning every thought into something positive.

Instead, try creating a thought that is **realistic, balanced, and helpful**.

For example:

Instead of:

“I messed this up. I'm terrible at this.”

Try:

“That didn't go the way I wanted. I can look at what happened and decide what I want to do differently next time.”

Or:

Instead of:

“I know they're upset with me.”

Try:

“I'm worried they're upset with me, but I don't actually know what they're thinking.”

With practice, noticing and examining self-talk can become easier. The goal isn't to never have a negative thought. It is to recognize when a thought deserves a closer look and give yourself the opportunity to respond differently.